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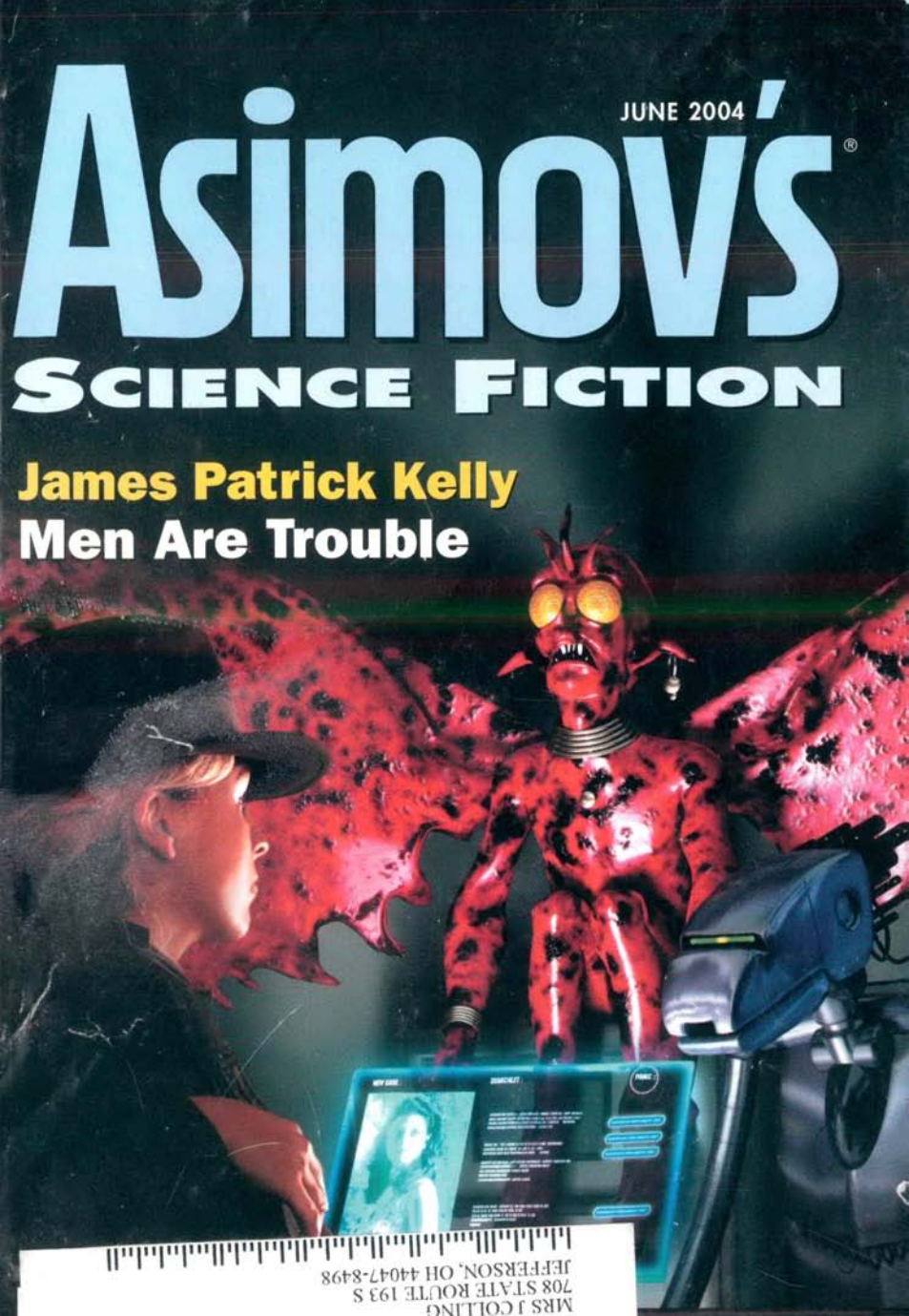

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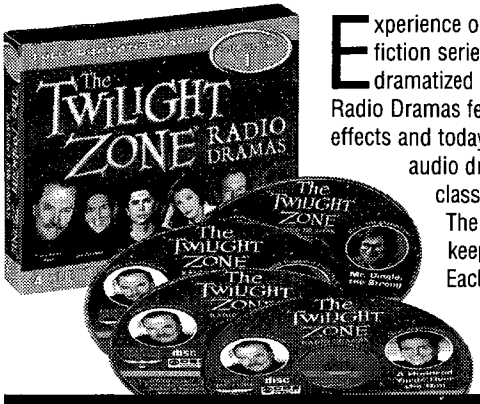

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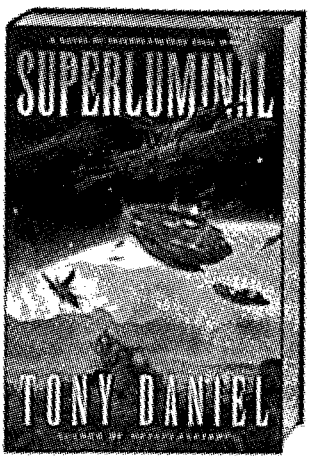

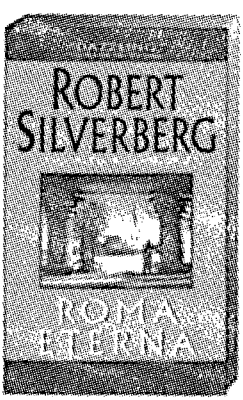

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Asimov's® Science Fiction

Vol. 28 No. 6
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Next Issue on Sale May 18, 2004

Cover Art by Fred Gambino

Novelettes

20 The Gladiator's War: A Dialog . . . . . Lois Tilton

104 Men Are Trouble . . . . . James Patrick Kelly

Short Stories

10 My Mother, Dancing . . . . . Nancy Kress

46 The Veteran . . . . . Neal Asher

56 Fallow Earth . . . . . Paul Melko

68 Turing Test . . . . . Robert R. Chase

84 The Buried Sword . . . . . Ruth Berman

96 Steep Silence . . . . . Lena DeTar

Poetry

45 Origami Rockets . . . . . Bruce Boston

55 *Galileo* Flies over Callisto and Finds Signs of a Magnetic Field . . . Geoffrey A. Landis

103 Big Idea . . . . . Mario Milosevic

Departments

4 Reflections: Toward a Theory of Story: Two . . . . . Robert Silverberg

136 On Books . . . . . Peter Heck

142 The SF Conventional Calendar . . . . . Erwin S. Strauss

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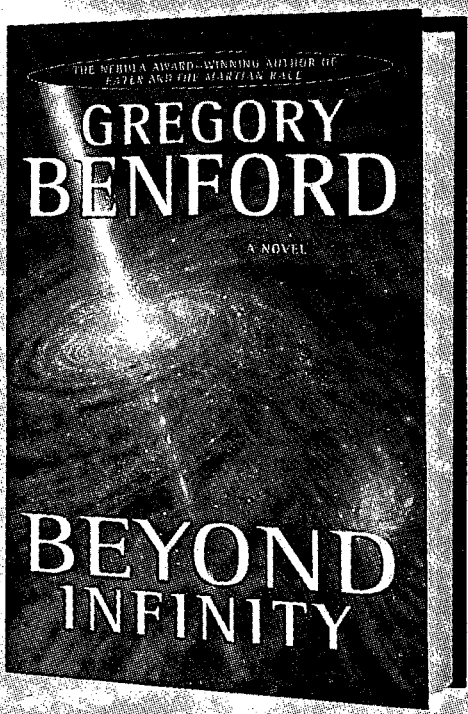

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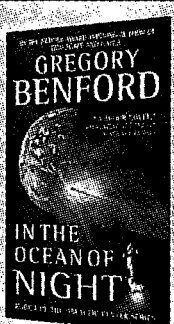
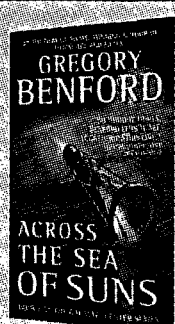


In the Ocean of Night
February 2004



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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

TOWARD A THEORY OF STORY: II
THERE IS ONE STORY AND ONE STORY ONLY

"There is one story and one story only," said Robert Graves in his lovely poem, "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," and perhaps in a certain sense that is true, though I have taken Graves' line out of context and what he meant by it is something quite different from the meaning I want to attach to it. For I want to use it as corroboration of the theory of fiction I began to develop in last month's column, that all imaginative narrative is based on a single plot skeleton that goes back into astonishing reaches of antiquity.

The Graves line seems to contradict Robert A. Heinlein's famous advice that actually there are *three* stories, which he called Boy Meets Girl, The Little Tailor, and The Man Who Learned Better. But in fact all three of Heinlein's fundamental plot structures, though they do very cleverly summarize the essential story themes that underlie nearly all fiction, can themselves be subsumed into the one I identified in our last issue as the basis of all the successful and lasting narrative of the past five thousand years:

A sympathetic and engaging character (or an unsympathetic one who is engaging nevertheless), faced with some immensely difficult problem that it is necessary for him to solve, makes a series of attempts to overcome that problem, frequently encountering challenging sub-problems and undergoing considerable hardship and anguish, and eventually, at the darkest moment of all, calls on some insight that was not accessible to him at the beginning of the story and either succeeds in his efforts or fails in a dramatically interesting and revelatory way, thereby arriving at new knowledge of some significant kind.

Taken on those terms, there is indeed one story only: the story of a conflict—perhaps with some external force, perhaps entirely within the soul of the protagonist—that leads to a clear resolution and illumination. Why has that formulation been so enduring and, apparently, universal? Is it simply that readers everywhere *expect* it, and so it has become a self-fulfilling requirement? *Why* do they expect it? When did the need for such a formulation get built into human cultural expectations?

A clue to our answer can be found in the history of Greek tragic drama. We know—because ancient Greek writers like Aristotle have told us so—that Greek drama evolved out of rituals in honor of the god Dionysus, who is most familiar to us as the god of wine, but who was to the Greeks a fertility god, the embodiment of all the forces of nature, manifest in the springtime rebirth of vegetation and the rising of the mating urge in animals.

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There's hardly anything about Dionysus in the Homeric poems, which date from the eighth or ninth century B.C., but that doesn't mean that the worship of Dionysus was unknown then, only that his cult was of little importance to the kings and heroes who are the protagonists of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* Dionysus was, so we think, the god of the poor and downtrodden, who in his name gave vent to their resentments from time to time in sacred revelry of a wildly turbulent kind. There are many different Dionysus myths—each Greek city apparently had its own version of the story—but all employ the same concept, a god who is slain and restored to life. Dionysus is the favorite child of Zeus; while still young he is killed and dismembered by jealous older gods, but at Zeus's command he is reassembled and revivified. The annual events held in honor of Dionysus reenacted his sufferings, death, and resurrection through the violent and bloody slaughter of bulls—or even, in some places, of human victims.

Eventually the leaders of Athens and other Greek city-states, fearing that these frenzied and unfettered rites in honor of Dionysus might overflow someday into revolution, co-opted them by establishing such public festivals as Athens' Great Dionysia, where poets, dancers, and choral groups performed sacred hymns retelling the legends of the god's life. All strata of the populace attended these festivals; they listened to the stirring recitations of the story of Dionysus and the orgies of his uninhibited followers, they experienced vicarious thrills instead of tearing up the town themselves, and they went home at the end of the evening in a benign mood, having been purged of potentially dangerous emotions by the impassioned singing and dancing of the performers.

In time the recitations and choral hymns that made up the Great Dionysia underwent various mutations. One of the new forms that emerged was that of the tragic play. Earlier, a poet had improvised verses in praise of Dionysus before a chorus that would reply with a traditional song; now the tales of the god were dramatized by interchanges between two semichoruses, and then by two speakers engaging in dialogue, and then, a generation or two later, *three* actors. Thus something very much like what we think of as a play evolved. The thematic range of the recitations widened, too, so that the dramas dealt not just with the death and rebirth of Dionysus but also with the ordeals of other great figures of Greek myth: Prometheus, Medea, Agamemnon, Theseus, Oedipus, Orestes, and many more.

One essential aspect of the festival-plays remained consistent throughout these evolutions. The purpose of the performance was not simply the amusement of the audience but its emotional cleansing, what Aristotle called its *catharsis,* its purgation.

As Aristotle explains in his *Poetics,* our souls are clogged by "affections," which for the sake of our mental health must be allowed periodically to discharge themselves in some harmless way. So boys often play violent games in which they pretend to be pirates or gangsters or soldiers. Girls in traditional societies act out the roles of nurses or mothers and see their imperiled charges through dire illnesses and crises. In primitive cul-

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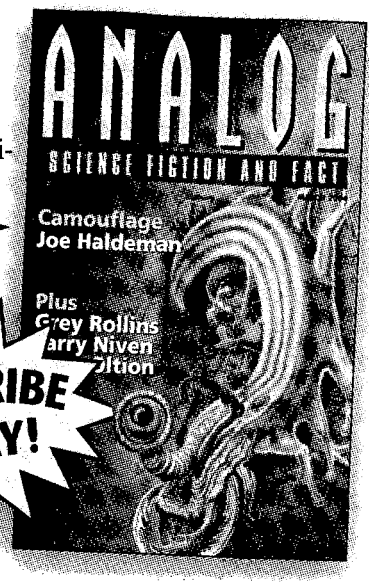

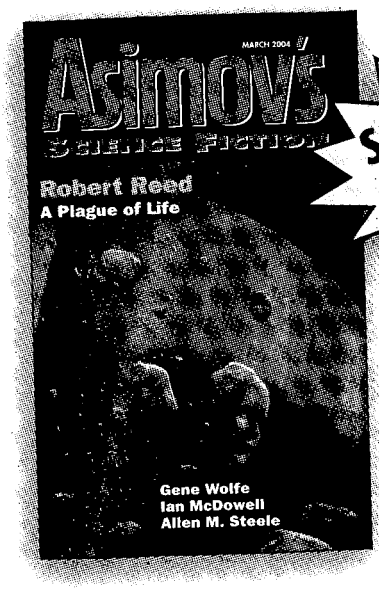

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tures dances and festivals much like the early Dionysiac revels bring about the release of the pent-up repressions. And in the highly civilized Greece of Aristotle's time the same sort of catharsis was had from the plays of such masters as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that were performed at the annual festivals of Dionysus.

In these plays the audience witnessed the tragic downfall of a great king like Agamemnon, the Greek commander-in-chief of the war against Troy, who overreached himself in a prideful way during the course of that campaign and was slain after his return from the war by his own wife. It looked on as the god Prometheus, determined to bring the knowledge of fire to mankind in defiance of the orders of Zeus, met with a terrible punishment but sustained his courage nevertheless. It watched the tribulations of Oedipus, King of Thebes, who by the casual decree of the indifferent gods found himself unknowingly murdering his father and marrying his own mother, and then launching into an investigation of the old king's death, eventually unmasked himself, to his amazement, as the criminal he was seeking.

In each of these tales—and in that of Pentheus, another king of Thebes who tried to block the spread of the orgiastic rites of Dionysus and who was torn apart by a group of drunken worshippers of the god that included his own mother; or that of Hippolytus, son of Theseus, unjustly accused of rape by his own stepmother, which led the deluded Theseus to ask the gods for his death; or that of Orestes, commanded by the gods to avenge his father Agamemnon's murder by committing the forbidden crime of slaying his mother—the Greek audience watched the torment of some larger-than-life figure caught in the grip of implacable destiny, and felt not only pity for that tragic hero's dire plight but also fear that some whim of the unpredictable gods would bring suffering upon themselves. And then—when the play reached its end, inevitably bringing some sort of reconciliation and insight into the tragic nature of life—there would come the sought-for moment of catharsis, the release, the "purging of pity and fear," as Aristotle's famous phrase has it, that is the primary purpose of tragic drama. The reconciliation of an Oedipus or an Orestes with the dictates of destiny provided the same cathartic effect as the rebirth of the slain Dionysus did in the original Greek theatrical events.

So, then: what originated as the uproarious commotion of a crowd of riotous, drunken plebeians has been domesticated first into a solemn festival of choral singing and poetic chanting and then into a series of dramatic masterpieces so effective in their storytelling that we still enjoy performances of many of the plays, twenty-five hundred years later. And in the course of that evolution a basic narrative scheme—a protagonist faced with a difficult problem, an intense struggle to cope with that problem, a climactic event that leads to new insight and a dramatically satisfying resolution—was developed, a narrative scheme that still can be traced in all modern drama and fiction.

Am I, then, tracing a direct line of evolution from the frantic ancient festivals of Dionysus to the *Foundation* series of Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert's *Dune*?

Yes, I am. But I'm by no means through with this theme.

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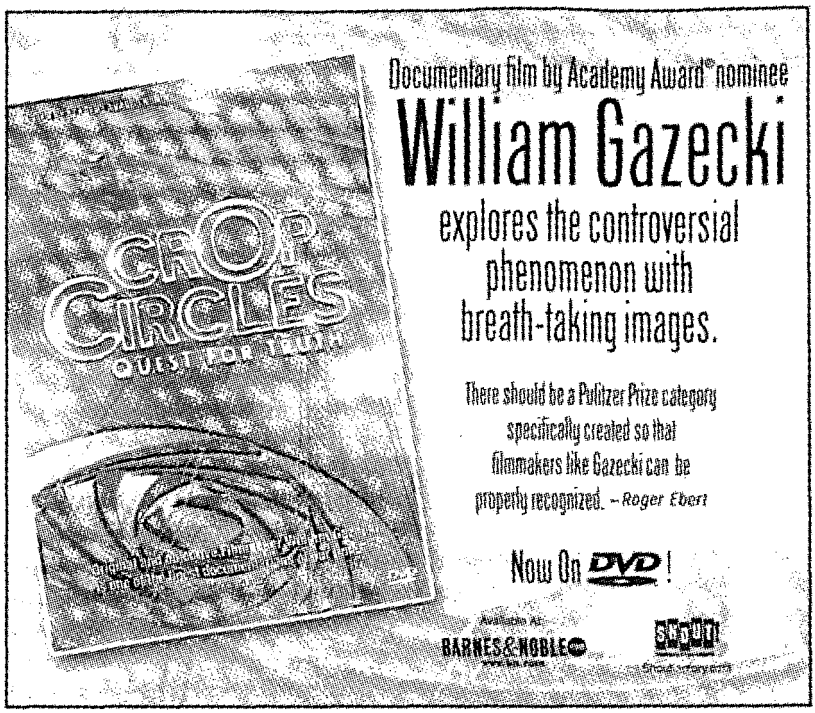
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Let's continue to look at Aristotle's "purging of pity and fear," and its deeper connections with the festivals of Dionysus. Those were *communal* festivals, after all. From the earliest drunken feasts down through the sophisticated theatrical entertainments of a playwright like Euripides, they offered something more than individual therapy. The protagonists of the tragic dramas were figures chosen to exemplify the sins of the community; they were singled out to suffer *on behalf of the community,* and put through terrible torment that set them apart from the people around them. They became outcasts who took with them the communal sins. They were, if you will, scapegoats for the sins of others. (Scapegoats were, in Biblical times, actual goats, laden with the sins of the ancient Hebrew community and set free in the wilderness to carry those sins away from the tribe.) So it's the audience as a group, not just the individual theatergoer, that undergoes a ritual cleansing while the tales of Oedipus or Orestes or Agamemnon are being retold. And not only is the audience purged of pity and fear, as Aristotle would have it, but it comes away transformed by the awe it has felt and the understanding it has gained. Vestiges of this therapeutic function survive to this day, I maintain, in the underlying structure of the stories we read and the films and plays we see for "entertainment."

But there's more, much more, to my notions of the origins of fiction. Dionysus, remember, was a fertility god. I'm going to need one more column to show you how truly ancient the basic plot skeleton of fiction really is. ❍

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MY MOTHER, DANCING

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress's most recent book, *Nothing Human*, came out last fall from Golden Gryphon Press. It has been called "a *Childhood's End* for the biotech millennium."

Copyright © Nancy Kress, 2000. First appeared in *Destination 3001*, edited by Robert Silverberg and Jacques Chambon, and published by Flammarion in 2000.

Fermi's Paradox, California, 1950: Since planet formation appears to be common, and since the processes that lead to the development of life are a continuation of those that develop planets, and since the development of life leads to intelligence and intelligence to technology—then why hasn't a single alien civilization contacted Earth?

Where is everybody?

They had agreed, laughing, on a form of the millennium contact, what Micah called "human standard," although Kabil had insisted on keeping hirs konfol and Deb had not dissolved hirs crest, which waved three inches above hirs and hummed. But, then, Deb! Ling had designed floating baktor for the entire ship, red and yellow mostly, that combined and recombined in kaleidoscopic loveliness that only Ling could have programmed. The viewport was set to magnify, the air mixture just slightly intoxicating, the tinglies carefully balanced by Cal, that master. Ling had wanted "natural" sleep cycles, but Cal's arguments had been more persuasive, and the tinglies massaged the limbic so pleasantly. Even the child had some. It was a party.

The ship slipped into orbit around the planet, a massive subJovian far from its sun, streaked with muted color. "Lovely," breathed Deb, who lived for beauty.

Cal, the biologist, was more practical: "I ran the equations; by now there should be around two hundred thousand of them in the rift, if the replication rate stayed constant."

"Why wouldn't it?" said Ling, the challenger, and the others laughed. The tinglies really were a good idea.

The child, Harrah, pressed hirs face to the window. "When can we land?"

The adults smiled at each other. They were so proud of Harrah, and so

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careful. Hirs was the first gene-donate of all of them except Micah, and probably the only one for the rest of them except Cal, who was a certified intellect donor. Kabil knelt beside Harrah, bringing hirs face close to the child's height.

"Little love, we can't land. Not here. We must see the creations in holo."

"Oh," Harrah said, with the universal acceptance of childhood. It had not changed in five thousand years, Ling was fond of remarking, that child idea that whatever it lived was the norm. But, then . . . *Ling*.

"Access the data," Cal said, and Harrah obeyed, reciting it aloud as hirs parents had all taught hirs. Ling smiled to see that Harrah still closed hirs eyes to access, but opened them to recite.

"The creations were dropped on this planet 273 E-years ago. They were the one-hundred-fortieth drop in the Great Holy Mission that gives us our life. The creations were left in a closed-system rift . . . what does that mean?"

"The air in the creations' valley doesn't get out to the rest of the planet, because the valley is so deep and the gravity so great. They have their own air."

"Oh. The creations are cyborged replicators, programmed for self-awareness. They are also programmed to expect human contact at the millennium. They . . ."

"Enough," said Kabil, still kneeling beside Harrah. Hirs stroked hirs hair, black today. "The important thing, Harrah, is that you remember that these creations are beings, different from us but with the same life force, the only life force. They must be respected, just as people are, even if they look odd to you."

"Or if they don't know as much as you," said Cal. "They won't, you know."

"I know," Harrah said. They had made hirs an accommodator, with strong genes for bonding. They already had Ling for challenge. Harrah added, "praise Fermi and Kwang and Arlbeni for the emptiness of the universe."

Ling frowned. Hirs had opposed teaching Harrah the simpler, older folklore of the Great Mission. Ling would have preferred the child receive only truth, not religion. But Deb had insisted. *Feed the imagination first,* hirs had said, *and later Harrah can separate science from prophecy.* But the tinglies felt sweet, and the air mixture was set for a party, and hirs own baktors floated in such graceful pattern that Ling, even Ling, could not quarrel.

"I wonder," Deb said dreamily, "what they have learned in 273 years."

"When will they holo?" Harrah said. "Are we there yet?"

Our mother is coming.

Two hours more and they will come, from beyond the top of the world. When they come, there will be much dancing. Much rejoicing. All of us will dance and rejoice, even those who have detached and let the air carry them away. Those ones will receive our transmissions and dance with us.

Or maybe our mother will also transmit to where those of us now sit.

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Maybe they will transmit to all, even those colonies out of our transmission range. Why not? Our mother, who made us, can do whatever is necessary.

First, the dancing. Then, the most necessary thing of all. Our mother will solve the program flaw. Completely, so that none of us will die. Our mother doesn't die. We are not supposed to die, either. Our mother will transmit the program to correct this.

Then the dancing there will be!

Kwang's Resolution, Bohr Station, 2552: Since the development of the Quantum Transport, humanity has visited nearly a thousand planets in our galaxy and surveyed many more. Not one of them has developed any life of any kind, no matter how simple. Not one.

No aliens have contacted Earth because there is nobody else out there.

Harrah laughed in delight. Hirs long black hair swung through a drift of yellow baktors. "The creations look like oysters!"

The holocube showed uneven rocky ground through thick, murky air. A short distance away rose the abrupt steep walls of the rift, thousands of feet high. Attached to the ground by thin, flexible, mineral-conducting tubes were hundreds of uniform, metal-alloy double shells. The shells held self-replicating nanomachinery, including the rudimentary AI, and living eukaryotes sealed into selectively permeable membranes. The machinery ran on the feeble sunlight and on energy produced by anaerobic bacteria, carefully engineered for the thick atmospheric stew of methane, hydrogen, helium, ammonia, and carbon dioxide.

The child knew none of this. Hirs saw the "oysters" jumping up in time on their filaments, jumping and falling, flapping their shells open and closed, twisting and flapping and bobbing. Dancing.

Kabil laughed, too. "Nowhere in the original programming! They learned it!"

"But what could the stimulus have been?" Ling said. "How lovely to find out!"

"Sssshhh, we're going to transmit," Micah said. Hirs eyes glowed. Micah was the oldest of them all; hirs had been on the original drop. "Seeding 140, are you there?"

"We are here! We are Seeding 140! Welcome, our mother!"

Harrah jabbed hirs finger at the holocube. "We're not your mother!"

Instantly, Deb closed the transmission. Micah said harshly, "Harrah! Your manners!"

The child looked scared. Deb said, "Harrah, we talked about this. The creations are not like us, but their ideas are as true as ours, on their own world. Don't laugh at them."

From Kabil, "Don't you remember, Harrah? Access the learning session!"

"I . . . remember," Harrah faltered.

"Then show some respect!" Micah said. "This is the Great Mission!"

Harrah's eyes teared. Kabil, the tender-hearted, put hirs hand on Harrah's shoulder. "Small heart, the Great Mission gives meaning to our lives."

"I . . . know. . . ."

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Micah said, "You don't want to be like those people who just use up all their centuries in mere pleasure, with no structure to their wanderings around the galaxy, no purpose beyond seeing what the nanos can produce that they haven't produced before, no difference between today and tomorrow, no—"

"That's sufficient," Ling says. "Harrah understands, and regrets. Don't give an Arlbeni Day speech, Micah."

Micah said stiffly, "It matters, Ling."

"Of course it matters. But so do the creations, and they're waiting. Deb, open the transmission again. . . . Seeding 140, thank you for your welcome! We return!"

Arlbeni's Vision, Planet Cadrys, 2678: We have been fools.

Humanity is in despair. Nano has given us everything, and nothing. Endless pleasures empty of effort, endless tomorrows empty of purpose, endless experiences empty of meaning. From evolution to sentience, sentience to nano, nano to the decay of sentience.

But the fault is ours. We have overlooked the greatest gift ever given humanity: the illogical emptiness of the universe. It is against evolution, it is against known physical processes. Therefore, how can it exist? And why?

It can exist only by the intent of something greater than the physical processes of the universe. A conscious Intent.

The reason can only be to give humanity, the universe's sole inheritor, knowledge of this Intent. The emptiness of the universe—anomalous, unexplainable, impossible—has been left for us to discover, as the only convincing proof of God.

Our mother has come! We dance on the seabed. We transmit the news to the ones who have detached and floated away. We rejoice together, and consult the original program.

"You are above the planetary atmosphere," we say, new words until just this moment, but now understood. All will be understood now, all corrected. "You are in a ship, as we are in our shells."

"Yes," says our mother. "You know we cannot land."

"Yes," we say, and there is momentary dysfunction. How can they help us if they cannot land? But only momentary. This is our mother. And they landed us here once, didn't they? They can do whatever is necessary.

Our mother says, "How many are you now, Seeding 140?"

"We are 79,432," we say. Sadness comes. We endure it, as we must.

Our mother's voice changes in wavelength, in frequency. "Seventy-nine thousand? Are you . . . we had calculated more. Is this replication data correct?"

A packet of data arrives. We scan it quickly; it matches our programming.

"The data is correct, but . . ." We stop. It feels like another dying ceremony, suddenly, and it is not yet time for a dying ceremony. We will wait another few minutes. We will tell our mother in another few minutes. Instead, we ask, "What is your state of replication, our mother?"

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Another change in wavelength and frequency. We scan and match data, and it is in our databanks: laughter, a form of rejoicing. Our mother rejoices.

"You aren't equipped for visuals, or I would show you our replicant," our mother says. "But the rate is much, much lower than yours. We have one new replicant with us on the ship."

"Welcome new replicant!" we say, and there is more rejoicing. There, and here.

"I've restricted transmission . . . there's the t-field's visual," Micah said.

A hazy cloud appeared to one side of the holocube, large enough to hold two people comfortably, three close together. Only words spoken inside the field would now transmit. Baktors scuttled clear of the ionized haze. Deb stepped inside the field, with Harrah; Cal moved out of it. Hirs frowned at Micah.

"They can't be only seventy-nine thousand-plus if the rate of replication held steady. Check the resource data, Micah."

"Scanning. . . . no change in available raw materials. . . . no change in sunlight per square unit."

"Scan their counting program."

"I already did. Fully functional."

"Then run an historical scan of replicants created."

"That will take time . . . there, it's started. What about attrition?"

Cal said, "Of course. I should have thought of that. Do a seismic survey and match it with the original data. A huge quake could easily have destroyed two-thirds of them, poor seedings. . . ."

Ling said, "You could ask them."

Kabil said, "If it's not a cultural taboo. Remember, they have had time to evolve a culture, we left them that ability."

"Only in response to environmental stimuli. Would a quake or a mudslide create enough stimulus pressure to evolve death taboos?"

They looked at each other. Something new in the universe, something humanity had not created . . . this was why they were here! Their eyes shone, their breaths came faster. Yet they were uncomfortable, too, at the mention of death. How long since any of them . . . oh, yes. Ling's clone in that computer malfunction, but so many decades ago. . . . Discomfort, excitement, compassion for Seeding 140, yes compassion most of all, how terrible if the poor creations had actually lost so many in a quake. . . . All of them felt it, and meant it, the emotion was genuine. And in their minds the finger of God touched them for a moment, with the holiness of the tiny human struggle against the emptiness of the universe.

"Praise Fermi and Kwang and Arlbeni . . ." one of them murmured, and no one was sure who, in the general embarrassment that took them a moment later. They were not children.

Micah said, "Match the seismic survey with the original data," and moved off to savor alone the residue of natural transcendence, rarest and strangest of the few things nano could not provide.

Inside the hazy field Harrah said, "Seeding! I am dancing just like you!" and moved hirs small body back and forth,up and down on the ship's deck.

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Arlbeni's Vision, Planet Cadrys, 2678: In the proof of God lies its corollary. The Great Intent has left the universe empty, but for us. It is our mission to fill it.

Look around you, look at what we've become. At the pointless destruction, the aimless boredom, the spiritual despair. The human race cannot exist without purpose, without vision, without faith. Filling the emptiness of the universe will rescue us from our own.

Our mother says, "Do you play games?"

We examine the data carefully. There is no match.

Our mother speaks again. "That was our new replicant speaking, Seeding 140. Hirs is only half-created as yet, and hirs program language is not fully functional. Hirs means, of the new programs you have created for yourselves since the original seeding, which ones in response to the environment are expressions of rejoicing? Like dancing?"

"Yes!" we say. "We dance in rejoicing. And we also throw pebbles in rejoicing and catch pebbles in rejoicing. But not for many years since."

"Do it now!" our mother says.

This is our mother. We are not rejoicing. But this is our mother. We pick up some pebbles.

"No," our mother says quickly, "you don't need to throw pebbles. That was the new replicant again. Hirs does not yet understand that seedings do what, and only what, they wish. Your . . . your mother does *not* command you. Anything you do, anything you have learned, is as necessary as what we do."

"I'm sorry again," our mother says, and there is physical movement registered in the field of transmission.

We do not understand. But our mother has spoken of new programs, of programs created since the seeding, in response to the environment. This we understand, and now it is time to tell our mother of our need. Our mother has asked. Sorrow floods us, rejoicing disappears, but now is the time to tell what is necessary.

Our mother will make all functional once more.

"Don't scold hirs like that, hirs is just a child," Kabil said. "Harrah, stop crying, we know you didn't mean to impute to them any inferiority."

Micah, hirs back turned to the tiny parental drama, said to Cal, "Seismic survey complete. No quakes, only the most minor geologic disturbances . . . really, the local history shows remarkable stability."

"Then what accounts for the difference between their count of themselves and the replication rate?"

"It can't be a real difference."

"But . . . oh! Listen. Did they just say—"

Hirs turned slowly toward the holocube.

Harrah said at the same moment, through hirs tears, "They stopped dancing."

Cal said, "Repeat that," remembered hirself, and moved into the transmission field, replacing Harrah. "Repeat that, please, Seeding 140. Repeat your last transmission."

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The motionless metal oysters said, "We have created a new program in response to the Others in this environment. The Others who destroy us."

Cal said, very pleasantly, "'Others'? What Others?"

"The new ones. The mindless ones. The destroyers."

"There are no others in your environment," Micah said. "What are you trying to say?"

Ling, across the deck in a cloud of pink bakterons, said, "Oh, oh . . . no . . . they must have divided into factions. Invented warfare amongst themselves! Oh. . . ."

Harrah stopped sobbing and stood, wide-eyed, on hirs sturdy short legs.

Cal said, still very pleasant, "Seeding 140, show us these Others. Transmit visuals."

"But if we get close enough to the Others to do that, we will be destroyed!"

Ling said sadly, "It *is* warfare."

Deb compressed hirs beautiful lips. Kabil turned away, to gaze out at the stars. Micah said, "Seeding . . . do you have any historical transmissions of the Others, in your databanks? Send those."

"Scanning . . . sending."

Ling said softly, "We always knew warfare was a possibility for any creations. After all, they have our unrefined DNA, and for millennia . . ." Hirs fell silent.

"The data is only partial," Seeding 140 said. "We were nearly destroyed when it was sent to us. But there is one data packet until the last few minutes of life."

The cheerful, dancing oysters had vanished from the holocube. In their place were the fronds of a tall, thin plant, waving slightly in the thick air. It was stark, unadorned, elemental. A multicellular organism rooted in the rocky ground, doing nothing.

No one on the ship spoke.

The holocube changed perspective, to a wide scan. Now there were whole stands of fronds, acres of them, filling huge sections of the rift. Plant after plant, drab olive green, blowing in the unseen wind.

After the long silence, Seeding 140 said, "Our mother? The Others were not there for ninety-two years. Then they came. They replicate much faster than we do, and we die. Our mother, can you do what is necessary?"

Still no one spoke, until Harrah, frightened, said, "What is it?"

Micah answered, hirs voice clipped and precise. "According to the data packet, it is an aerobic organism, using a process analogous to photosynthesis to create energy, giving off oxygen as a byproduct. The data includes a specimen analysis, broken off very abruptly as if the AI failed. The specimen is non-carbon-based, non-DNA. The energy sources sealed in Seeding 140 are anaerobic."

Ling said sharply, "Present oxygen content of the rift atmosphere?"

Cal said, "Seven point six two percent." Hirs paused. "The oxygen created by these . . . these 'Others' is poisoning the seeding."

"But," Deb said, bewildered, "why did the original drop include such a thing?"

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"It didn't," Micah said. "There is no match for this structure in the gene banks. It is not from Earth."

"Our mother?" Seeding 140 said, over the motionless fronds in the holocube. "Are you still there?"

Disciple Arlbeni, Grid 743.9, 2999: As we approach this millennium marker, rejoice that humanity has passed both beyond superstition and spiritual denial. We have a faith built on physical truth, on living genetics, on human need. We have, at long last, given our souls not to a formless Deity, but to the science of life itself. We are safe, and we are blessed.

Micah said suddenly, "It's a trick."

The other adults stared at hirs. Harrah had been hastily reconfigured for sleep. Someone—Ling, most likely—had dissolved the floating baktons and blanked the wall displays, and only the empty transmission field added color to the room. That, and the cold stars beyond.

"Yes," Micah continued, "a trick. Not malicious, of course. But we programmed them to learn, and they did. They had some seismic event, or some interwarfare, and it made them wary of anything unusual. They learned that the unusual can be deadly. And the most unusual thing they know of is us, set to return at 3000. So they created a transmission program designed to repel us. Xenophobia, in a stimulus-response learning environment. You said it yourself, Ling, the learning components are built on human genes. And we have xenophobia as an evolved survival response!"

Cal jack-knifed across the room. Tension turned hirs ungraceful. "No. That sounds appealing, but nothing we gave Seeding 140 would let them evolve defenses that sophisticated. And there was no seismic event for the internal stimulus."

Micah said eagerly, "We're the stimulus! Our anticipated return! Don't you see . . . we're the 'Others'!"

Kabil said, "But they call us 'mother'. . . . They were thrilled to see us. They're not xenophobic to us."

Deb spoke so softly the others could barely hear, "Then it's a computer malfunction. Cosmic bombardment of their sensory equipment. Or at least, of the unit that was 'dying.' Malfunctioning before the end. All that sensory data about oxygen poisoning is compromised."

"Of course!" Ling said. But hirs was always honest. "At least . . . no, compromised data isn't that coherent, the pieces don't fit together so well biochemically. . . ."

"And non-terrestrially," Cal said, and at the jagged edge in his voice, Micah exploded.

"California, these are not native life! There is no native life in the galaxy except on Earth!"

"I know that, Micah," Cal said, with dignity. "But I also know this data does not match anything in the d-bees."

"Then the d-bees are incomplete!"

"Possibly."

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Ling put hirs hands together. They were long, slender hands with very long nails, created just yesterday. *I want to grab the new millennium with both hands,* Ling had laughed before the party, *and hold it firm.* "Spores. Panspermia."

"I won't listen to this!" Micah said.

"An old theory," Ling went on, gasping a little. "Seeding 140 said the Others weren't there for their first hundred years. But if the spores blew in from space on the solar wind and the environment was right for them to germinate—"

Deb said quickly, "Spores aren't really life. Wherever they came from, they're not alive."

"Yes, they are," said Kabil. "Don't quibble. They're alive."

Micah said loudly, "I've given my entire life to the Great Mission. I was on the original drop for this very planet."

"They're alive," Ling said, "and they're not ours."

"My entire life!" Micah said. Hirs looked at each of them in turn, hirs face stony, and something terrible glinted behind the beautiful deep-green eyes.

Our mother does not answer. Has our mother gone away?

Our mother would not go away without helping us. It must be that they are still dancing.

We can wait.

"The main thing is Harrah, after all," Kabil said. Hirs sat slumped on the floor. They had been talking so long.

"A child needs secure knowledge. Purpose. Faith," Cal said.

Ling said wearily, "A child needs truth."

"Harrah," Deb crooned softly. "Harrah, made of all of us, future of our genes, small heart Harrah. . . ."

"Stop it, Debaron," Cal said. "Please."

Micah said, "Those things down there are not real. They are not. Test it, Cal. I've said so already. Test it. Send down a probe, try to bring back samples. There's nothing there."

"You don't know that, Micah."

"I know!" Micah said, and was subtly revitalized. Hirs sprang up. "Test it!"

Ling said, "A probe isn't necessary. We have the transmitted data and—"

"Not reliable!" Micah said.

"—and the rising oxygen content. Data from our own sensors."

"Outgassing!"

"Micah, that's ridiculous. And a probe—"

"A probe might come back contaminated," Cal said.

"Don't risk contamination," Kabil said suddenly. "Not with Harrah here."

"Harrah, made of us all. . . ." Deb had turned hirs back on the rest now, and lay almost curled into a ball, lost in hirs powerful imagination. Deb!

Kabil said, almost pleadingly, to Ling, "Harrah's safety should come first."

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"Harrah's safety lies in facing the truth," Ling said. But hirs was not strong enough to sustain it alone. They were all so close, so knotted together, a family. Knotted by Harrah and by the Great Mission, to which Ling, no less than all the others, had given hirs life.

"Harrah, small heart," sang Deb.

Kabil said, "It isn't as if we have proof about these 'Others.' Not real proof. We don't actually *know*."

"*I* know," Micah said.

Cal looked bleakly at Kabil. "No. And it is wrong to sacrifice a child to a supposition, to a packet of compromised data, to a . . . a superstition of creations so much less than we are. You know that's true, even though we none of us ever admit it. But I'm a biologist. The creations are limited DNA, with no ability to self-modify. Also strictly regulated nano, and AI only within careful parameters. Yes, of course they're life forms deserving respect on their own terms, of course of course I would never deny that—"

"None of us would," Kabil said.

"—but they're not *us*. Not ever us."

A long silence, broken only by Deb's singing.

"Leave orbit, Micah," Cal finally said, "before Harrah wakes up."

Disciple Arlbeni, Grid 743.9, 2999: We are not gods, never gods, no matter what the powers evolution and technology have given us, and we do not delude ourselves that we are gods, as other cultures have done at other millennia. We are human. Our salvation is that we know it, and do not pretend otherwise.

Our mother? Are you there? We need you to save us from the Others, to do what is necessary. Are you there?

Are you still dancing? ○

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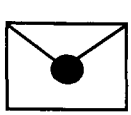

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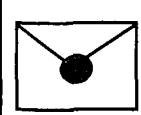

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THE GLADIATOR'S WAR: A DIALOG

Lois Tilton

Lois Tilton has recently turned to ancient history for her fiction. Coming soon is her report on the Trojan War by a spy for the Hittite Great King in the anthology, *The First Heroes*, from Tor. She also has an alternate history story of Pericles and Sophocles in our inventory. On "The Gladiator's War" she says, "Varro was the most erudite Roman author of his day, and probably did write a history of the Spartacus war." If his account existed, it seems to have been lost to time. Fortunately, we get to read Ms. Tilton's.

Crixus

Sure, I know who you are. I read the book you wrote about Spartacus. But I suppose you don't believe an uneducated barbarian can read Latin.

Marcus Terentius Varro

If you read my book, you must know that you're in it, too: Crixus the Gaul, Spartacus' legate, his most trusted associate.

Crixus

That just proves you don't know as much about what happened as you think you do.

Varro

Which is just the reason I want to speak to you now. It's been thirty years since Spartacus burned Rome. In all the city's history, even more than Hannibal, he was the most dangerous enemy we ever faced.

Crixus

You forget about Brennus. He sacked Rome. A barbarian Gaul did what Hannibal never could.

Varro

That was three hundred years ago, and no one wrote the history of his wars. Brennus is almost forgotten, except for his name. But Spartacus

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fought his war in our lifetime and we still know so little about him. He's an enigma. I'm an old man now, you're an old man, but you were with Spartacus from the beginning. You may be the last living man who can speak for him, tell us who he really was, what he did.

Crixus

Enigma—that's one of those Greek words, isn't it?

Sure, I fought with Spartacus, and you fought against him. If you wanted to know who he was, why didn't you ask him while he was alive? Why should I tell you now?

Varro

So that two hundred years from now, men will know the truth about him, instead of lies. Is that what you want for the memory of Spartacus? Would you rather all his deeds were forgotten, lost to history, just as Brennus was?

Crixus

Irony—isn't that the word for it? That after all we did, it's left for a Roman to tell how it happened. I thought you were supposed to leave all that to the Greeks, writing histories and books.

Varro

I think the Latin language is at least as well-suited as the Greek to write of war.

Crixus

Well, I'm just an uneducated barbarian. But I know what happened and what didn't. For one thing, you wrote in your book that Spartacus set out to make war on Rome from the beginning, when we broke out of the gladiator pens in Capua.

We were only a few dozen gladiators—who could imagine us sacking Rome? All we wanted was to stay out of the arena. I figured we'd hide in the mountains and live out our lives as bandits. Maybe things would have been a lot different, then, if Rome had only let us go.

Varro

But you couldn't really expect Rome to ignore an armed slave uprising.

Crixus

That's what Spartacus told us. He said Rome would send soldiers after us, and more soldiers after them if they had to. But it was Rome coming after us, that's how we started to fight.

It was that Roman praetor, Clodius Glaber, who followed us all the way to Vesuvius. See, Spartacus, he knew how Romans fight. He was a Thracian auxiliary, served years fighting Roman wars for pay. He was the one who could see how Clodius made his mistake, thinking he had us trapped up on the mountain. You know there's only one road down off Vesuvius. Well, he stationed his guards on the road, but he never bothered to surround the mountain. He was just going to sit down there in his camp and wait and starve us out.

But Spartacus had other ideas. He was the one who saw how we could take them from behind, by surprise. We made ropes out of vines and used them to climb down over a sheer drop, where Clodius hadn't even stationed any guards. Spartacus led us off that mountain, then around behind the Roman camp to attack it from the rear. Me, I would have just

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rushed them straightaway and got us all killed doing it. We knew fighting from the gladiator school, but most of us had never heard of tactics. That's the difference Spartacus made.

And then there we were, in the middle of the Roman camp, full of dead legionaries. Dead Romans. The ones we didn't kill ran away. It was Spartacus who told us to throw away our own gear and strip the armor off the legionaries, to arm ourselves as soldiers, not gladiators.

That was when we swore the oath: to die together, fighting, as free men. Not gladiators, not slaves.

Of course Rome sent more of them after us, to hunt us down, just the way Spartacus said they would. Two praetors commanding two full legions. But they were just as careless as Clodius, they figured it wouldn't take much to wipe out a band of escaped slaves. That was the mistake the Romans always made—they told themselves we were only slaves.

Varro

But you know those weren't experienced troops. In those days, we didn't keep a regular standing army in Rome. All our legions were off on campaign in the provinces, in Hispania and Asia. I remember I was with Pompeius in Hispania, fighting Sertorius and his rebels. The only soldiers the senate had to send after Spartacus were new conscripts, not even properly trained.

Crixus

That's what Spartacus kept telling us. He was always warning us not to get overconfident, that one day we'd come up against a real veteran legion and learn the difference. But even then, you know, we had the advantage of numbers. More men kept coming every day to join us, desperate men. Maybe we weren't a real army yet, but a month after we escaped from Capua we had more than ten thousand men. A lot of them were herdsmen, mostly Gauls and Germans—big, strong men. They knew the mountains, the best places to hide, where to set an ambush. That's how we fought, from the mountains, from ambush. When the Romans thought they were hunting us, we hunted them. Our men made spears from sharpened tree branches, they wove shields out of wicker. We forged their leg-irons into blades. Anything that we could use as a weapon. We taught them, we gladiators did, how to hold a sword, how to use it, how to kill Romans. No better sword instructor than a gladiator, you know.

Varro

Tell me, is the story true that Spartacus killed the praetor Lucius Cossinius, making him fight as a gladiator?

Crixus

No, I was the one who killed Cossinius. But it wasn't in the gladiator ring. Cossinius was careless. Some of our scouts came on him while he was visiting a bathhouse with just a few guards. He tried to escape, but I pulled him from his horse and took his head. I kept it as a trophy for a while.

Varro

The way the Gauls do.

Crixus

I am a Gaul. A barbarian, and that's all I'll ever be to a Roman.

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Varro

So it's not true that Spartacus made Roman prisoners fight each other as gladiators? Men have told me they witnessed some of those games. Did they lie?

Crixus

Oh, sure, we did it. Our people loved to see Romans in the gladiator ring, hacking at each other. But you mixed up the praetors in your book. It was the other one who died in the games—Varinius, I think his name was.

Varro

Publius Varinius. He's the one Spartacus killed in the arena?

Crixus

No, not exactly. I'll tell you how it happened. It was after we beat the rest of Cossinus' legion, the ones who didn't just run away after he was dead. By that time we had almost thirty thousand men, slaves and free men, too, joining us. We were operating in Samnia and Lucania then, harrying the Romans through the mountains, the rough terrain. Varinius had lost about half of his men, some to us and some to desertion. It was getting later in the year, and the weather had turned bad.

He'd gone into quarters, waiting for reinforcements to come from Rome. His camp was on one hill, we were on the next, close enough that the sentries on both sides could hear each other on watch. He had a strong camp in a good position over there—and plenty of provisions, which we never had. We had to send men out every night to forage.

Well, Varinius tried one assault on our walls, but we beat him off, and after that his men were afraid to try it again. And the longer he delayed, the more of them were deserting. We could have waited them out, but we were getting hungrier, and sooner or later their reinforcements might show up.

So Spartacus decided to force the issue. He said it was time we got a taste of open battle. Like a real army, not just a mob of escaped slaves. We used a ruse to make the Romans think we'd abandoned our camp, and when Varinius marched his men out after us, we attacked.

And we beat them. A Roman legion, and we beat them in the open field, man to man, sword to sword.

Oh, it was good! I had my victories in the arena, but they were bitter, and that moment was so sweet it went to my head like a jar of the best Falernian wine. I really did think we were ready to conquer the world. Or Rome, at least, which amounts to the same thing. That's when we first started to think about it, marching on Rome, if you want to know.

I think the Greeks call it *hybris,* don't they—what happens to a man just before the gods strike him down.

The women were already busy with their knives, cutting throats, the men stripping the prisoners and driving them under the yoke. In the Roman camp we found the cartloads of chains they brought to use on us—ten-pound leg irons and collars. We thought we'd see how the Romans liked wearing them for a change. That was when we discovered the praetor Varinius in with the rest of the prisoners, hiding in an ordinary legionary's armor.

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Not a happy man, your friend Varinius, to find himself in chains and a slave collar. It offended his *dignitas*. It offended him to see me sitting there with my barbarian backside in his ivory curule chair. It offended him that we captured his legion's eagle. It offended him to see Cossinius' head stuck up on a spear—my personal battle standard; you could still recognize him then. Varinius cursed us. He said we were only a mob of insolent slaves and he'd see us all crucified as we deserved.

You'd think a man in chains ought to be more careful what he says. But this is something a slave knows a lot better than a Roman praetor.

Now, I'll tell you one thing about Spartacus—he never really enjoyed bloodshed, not the way a Roman does. He always said he had enough of that in the arena. But there were times you wouldn't know it. Too bad for Varinius that he picked one of those times. Because Spartacus had just been counting our dead, and Oenomaus was one of them.

You probably don't recognize his name, but he was famous in his day. Eighty-two fights in the arena, eighty-two wins. He already had his wooden sword, his freedom, by the time we broke out of Capua, but he took the oath with the rest of us, to stand together and fight until death.

Well, Death finally found him. Of course, he finds all of us in the end. But when Spartacus heard what Varinius was saying about crucifixion, he looked over the Roman prisoners, then said to me, "We have at least two hundred pairs here. Oenomaus can have Roman blood for his funeral games."

The funeral, it was for all our dead, not just Oenomaus. We lost over a thousand in that battle. People were already bringing in the bodies and gathering wood for the pyres. It was the first time we'd ever had casualties on that scale. Not so many dead as the Romans, of course, but it darkened my mood to see them all piled up together, ready for the fire. The Roman dead—we left them for the Romans. Or the crows and wolves, it didn't matter to us. We knew this wasn't going to be one of those wars the Greeks like to tell stories about, where both sides send heralds back and forth under truce so they can give their dead a proper funeral. Romans don't make truces with slaves.

Next morning, Spartacus made sacrifice to the gods and gave a funeral speech before we lit the pyres. I remember what he said. "*Morituri*—that's what we called ourselves in the gladiator arena, men who are going to die. Of course all men are doomed to die. But these brothers of ours died fighting as free men instead of slaves, and for that, I salute them."

That was the kind of speech he made.

Then it was time for the games. Our people were all looking forward to the spectacle.

The Romans didn't want to cooperate, but we knew all the ways to force men into the ring to fight—the metal-tipped scourge, the hot irons. In Capua, that pig Lentulus Batiatus at the gladiator school liked to crucify a gladiator from time to time as a lesson to the rest of us. We gave the same lesson to the Romans, to teach them what would happen if they didn't give us a good show. The threat of the cross offended their *dignitas* even more than fighting as gladiators. Crucifixion is supposed to be a death for slaves, not Roman praetors.

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Varro

You crucified him? Publius Varinius?

Crixus

Our people always liked the sight of a Roman up on a cross, the higher the rank, the better.

So there was Varinius looking down from his cross (he should be honored, we told him as we were raising it, we were giving him the best view from up there) while we staged the games. We sent the Romans out to fight naked, not even letting them keep a loincloth. All they had to protect themselves was a sword. Ten pairs at a time were matched up for the first round, then we paired the survivors.

To those of us used to the arena, it wasn't very good sport. Varinius' legionaries weren't much better as gladiators than they'd been as soldiers. That pig Batiatus would have sold them to the mines. They just didn't know what to do. They had no shields, and they didn't have the notion of parrying or blocking with their blades. That's the difference between legionaries and gladiators, and like you say, Varinius' men weren't even properly trained as soldiers. But most of our people knew nothing about the finer points of fencing, and they were enjoying it. The sight of Roman blood being spilled for a change was good enough for them.

Once the first few rounds were over and we brought on the surviving pairs one at a time, the betting got serious. Nobody knows how to handicap fighters like another gladiator. In the arena, though, we never bet on each other. It would be ill-wishing a man, to do that. But now we were the spectators and letting the Romans do the dying.

It was Spartacus who picked the man with the gray hair. "That one looks like a centurion," he said. "My money's on him."

We all said no, he was too old, but Spartacus shook his head. "No, look how he moves." And he was right. The centurion was just waiting there in the center of the ring while the other one was wearing himself out circling around him, afraid to close in. I could see how the centurion was watching for his opening. The people were cheering on both fighters, but those of us who knew the arena had no doubt what the end would be. The centurion took his man down with a single sword thrust.

Then Gannicus had the idea, "What do you say we each pick out a man, and if he's the last survivor, the winner takes him on in the ring?"

Spartacus agreed. His man was the centurion, the one with the gray hair.

The last round, it was still the centurion and one of the military tribunes—just a boy, but his tutor must have showed him how to handle a sword, because he could hold his own. The crowd was worked up by then, everyone yelling for one or the other of the fighters. A lot of bets were riding on that contest.

I'll tell you something. There are times, in the arena, when the crowd can wake up a spark in you. You're not just trying to stay alive, you want to win, you want the applause and the victory crown. I don't know if it was like that for those two Romans that day. Maybe they just wanted to live, maybe they thought we might spare the last survivor. Whatever the reason, it was finally a decent fight. Not up to the standards of Capua,

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but those two both knew what to do with a sword. It wasn't faked, either—I can tell the difference.

Then it was finally the centurion standing alone, the last man. Spartacus' man.

So he stood and said, "My turn, now."

The people saw him and started to cheer, they started to chant his name. But Spartacus took his time. He wanted to give the Roman some rest. He ordered our men to let him have water, or *posca,* whatever he wanted. He called for someone to bring him a Roman sword and stripped down to meet the Roman on even terms. Of course, he had every advantage. Twenty years younger, and taller than the Roman, tall for a Thracian, with a long reach on him. I remember he was popular in the arena, in his day. The women, especially, liked him.

We all joked, "I'll bet on *that* one." But there were no takers.

When he stepped out to meet the Roman, the crowd went wild with applause, cheering and calling his name. *Spartacus! Spartacus!*

Just about then Gannicus leaned in my direction and whispered, "Do you think they'd cheer for Crixus the same way, if it had been you going out there?"

I shrugged it off, at the time, but his remark darkened my mood.

The handlers had to prod the Roman to get him back on his feet, and I could see he was stiff and hurting. He had to know he was going to die, but he went out to the center of the arena with his head held up high. A brave man.

I tell you, it happens often enough. You cheer for a man, and you start to take his side a little, even if he is a Roman. The centurion didn't have a chance against Spartacus, of course, but I was thinking I'd like to see him make a good end. Maybe I might even put my thumb out to spare him.

I think Spartacus might have felt the same way. He went out there naked with only a sword in his hand, to give the Roman every fair chance he could. He stood in the center of the ring to face him and give him the gladiator's salute. I don't know what he said then, the crowd was making too much noise to hear. But I saw how the Roman answered him. He spat on him.

After that—gods, it was beautiful to watch how he played that bloody Roman, leading him like it was a dance. One cut, another cut, and another. He was in complete control with every stroke. The Roman had to know that Spartacus could have killed him at any time, with any one of those cuts, if he'd wanted it that way.

I tell you, in Capua, they would have sold their own mothers to see that fight!

The thing is, it wasn't like Spartacus to play a man that way. I knew a lot of other men who enjoyed that kind of thing, or they'd do it in the arena just to please the crowds, but never Spartacus. Our people were all cheering themselves raw, watching it, but I saw his face, and it was like it had turned to wood or stone, like that story the Greeks tell about the Gorgons.

Of course the centurion never had a chance. He never touched Spartacus, not a scratch, but you know, even when he was so blinded by his own

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blood he couldn't see, he never dropped his sword, never let up his guard. I still almost had to admire him for it, even after what he did.

Varro

What was the centurion's name? Do you know it?

Crixus

Maybe Spartacus asked him just before they fought, but he never said.

He was drunk at the funeral feast afterward, and that wasn't like him, either. But everyone was drinking that night, to honor our dead, to celebrate our victory, and there was more than one brawl on the Gaulish side as men bragged about their deeds on the battlefield. We barbarians do that, you know. We don't have Roman manners.

But from Spartacus, not a word, not even to his woman.

Only once, when the feast was almost over, I happened to see him look over at Varinius, still up there on his cross. Everyone else was either eating, drinking, fighting, or groping the women. It came to me then why the Romans think crucifixion is the perfect punishment for slaves. A man means nothing once he's up there on the cross. All that suffering, day after day until you die, and no one notices. If you're a slave, they just nail you up and forget you.

So I got up and went over to piss on Varinius' cross. Then on the way back to my seat, I stopped and said to Spartacus, "Did you ever think, that day in Capua when we broke out of the pens—did you ever think a mob of gladiators and slaves would end up beating three Roman armies and crucifying their commanders? One day we'll have the whole damned Roman Senate up on crosses right next to this one!"

He turned on me, he said, "Crixus, you're a fool! Do you actually think we beat a real Roman army yesterday?"

It was just what he'd been saying all along, but I didn't like to hear it, not in the middle of a victory feast, not with all the wine inside me. And no man likes to hear himself called a fool. I grabbed Cossinus' head from my spear and threw it down on the table in front of Spartacus. "This was a real Roman praetor! So is that one, up on the cross. Look around! We already have enough men here to make up three legions, and more of them coming in every day. We'll beat them, because there are always more slaves than there are Romans. And for every Roman we kill, more slaves come to join us!"

"You don't know," he said. "You just don't know Romans. They won't ever give up. No matter how many times we beat them, they'll just send another army after us. There's always another Roman army! Always!"

Varro

He was right, of course.

Crixus

Of course he was. And I knew it then, even if I wouldn't admit it.

Fact is, I was the one who almost tore our army apart. *Hybris,* like I said. Mine. I was drunk on victory. What Spartacus said offended my pride, it darkened my mood. But he was right—I was a fool. And I almost lost us the war.

Varro

What do you mean?

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Crixus

Spartacus was determined to make us into a real army, a force to match the Romans on even terms. We had proper arms, that we took from the Romans. Even while we were burning the dead, our smiths were already setting up forges where they could repair the holes in armor and refit spearheads to their shafts to make them ready for the next battle.

A month after we beat Varinius, our numbers had doubled, from thirty thousand to sixty. Men never stopped coming to join us—I was right about that, at least. Our army always outnumbered the Romans. But it was Spartacus' army. He trained them, he took slave herdsmen and shepherds and formed them into cohorts, the cohorts into legions. The basic training was a lot like the gladiator schools, but Spartacus went further than that. He wanted us drilling in formation, keeping in line, learning group maneuvers—all the Roman methods of fighting. Wherever we stopped for the night, he insisted on building a regular camp like the Romans did, too, with ditch and wall and watchtowers.

"Discipline," he kept saying. "With discipline we're an army, without it we're only a mob of slaves."

The trouble was, not everyone thought as much of discipline as he did. The men complained they didn't run away from slavery to trade their overseer for a centurion or dig latrines after a long day's march. Men like the Greeks or Syrians were easier with that kind of discipline, but it came harder to the Gauls and Germans—we barbarians are used to a different way of fighting. Some days, I thought Spartacus was going to tear out his hair a hundred times, trying to get it through to them that they had to keep in formation, not run out ahead of the line waving their swords and screaming, trying to be the first one killed. He said, "Why else do you think you were the slaves and they were the masters? You lost and they won."

Well, men don't like to hear that kind of thing, even if it's true. It offended their pride.

The thing is, I still think that man to man, the odds say the Gaul is going to beat the Roman. It's the training that makes the difference. The discipline of the cohort. I just wish I understood that, back then.

And right after we beat Varinius, it seemed for a while there were no more Romans to fight. We roamed all over the south of Italia, pillaging everywhere, and there was no one to stop us. It made us overconfident.

"They'll send more legions," Spartacus kept warning us. "They'll conscript more men, or call for volunteers, or bring some of the veteran legions back from the provinces. We have to be ready to meet them."

Varro

Then he knew what he was talking about. I saw the dispatches from Rome. As soon as the senate got word about Varinius' defeat, they ordered both the year's new consuls into the field to raise another army. All the landowners were remembering the slave revolts in Sicily. They ran to Rome screaming they were going to be murdered in their beds. The problem was that raising yet another army took time. In fact, the senate was already talking about recalling some of the legions from the provinces, from the wars with Sertorius and Mithridates, but nothing came of it, not then. By the time they finally did, it was too late.

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Crixus

But all that time we had no opposition. It was hard for a lot of the men to think about training and discipline when there was so much more plunder over every hill. And we had to keep on the move. It was winter, too late in the year for campaigning, but we had no choice, with the numbers of men we had—it was either loot or starve. We'd swarm onto one of those big plantations in Lucania, break into the barracks and strike the chains off the slaves. Then we'd roast a few hundred cattle and sheep, drag out the wine and have a feast. A day or so later, we left with everything we could carry, along with the slaves who wanted to join us. What we couldn't haul along, we burned.

It was the same thing when we came to a town. A lot of our men could think of nothing but killing the Romans and raping their women, taking whatever they could find. Sometimes Spartacus tried to stop them, but how could he? It was what the men all wanted, plunder and revenge. I can't say I didn't do my own share of it, either. But it got to the point where Spartacus said he hoped to see a Roman army marching down on us, because it was the only thing that might sober our men. And I admit it, the Gauls were maybe the worst. Gauls and Germans—the barbarians.

Then there was something else. A lot of the men who joined us then weren't slaves. Free men came, mostly landless men, Samnites and Lucanians, and they hated Rome. Some of them were bandits out of the mountains and hills, looking to join in the looting and kill Romans with the rest of us. But for a lot of them, revenge was even more important than plunder.

Varro

Samnites were always enemies of Rome. Thousands of them were outlawed after the civil war, when they took Marius' side against Sulla. It hadn't been so long ago, and men still remembered.

Crixus

Well, that's where the trouble came from. Between us and the Samnites. They knew the Roman way of war, the discipline and training. Most of them had their own armor and weapons, too, up there in the mountains where they were bandits. It was like they'd been waiting for somebody like Spartacus to come along and lead them against Rome again.

Most of us, Gauls and Germans, thought we were doing just fine the way we were. There were plenty of towns we hadn't looted yet, plenty of plunder.

So there were arguments. Before long, fights were breaking out—fights over loot, over women, over one man stepping in another man's shadow. I know, you put that many men together in an army camp, you're always going to have a few brawls. But this was different, most of the fights were barbarians against the Samnites, and it was getting so there was bad blood between us. A man alone didn't dare go over to the other side of the camp. Spartacus was tearing out his hair. He tried to stop it, he had men flogged for brawling, but the mood in the army only got worse.

It seemed to me and some of the other Gauls that Spartacus was starting to prefer the Samnites to us, appointing them to command, passing

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over men who'd been with him since the night we broke out of Capua. A man named Trebatius, one of the bandit leaders, was the worst of them. He seemed to think he was some kind of Samnite king.

Varro

There was a Samnite commander named Trebatius during the Social War. Could this be the same man?

Crixus

His son, I think he said. Pontius Trebatius.

Of course I didn't like it. Or him. Ever since Oemomaus was killed, I'd been second in command after Spartacus. Now it was this Samnite taking my place. And men were coming to me, men like Gannicus and Castus, saying, "Who are these Samnites? Who's this Trebatius? Why does Spartacus listen to him instead of us? Instead of you?"

Gannicus even said, "Why do we have to follow Spartacus? Why should a Thracian lead this army and not a Gaul? You're the one with the head of a Roman praetor on your spear. You're as good as him, or better."

I listened to him. That's what *hybris* does to you. I even started to believe him.

The break between us came when we sacked some little mountain hamlet in Luceria. See, Trebatius wanted to revive the old Samnite wars with Rome, and he had Spartacus convinced these towns might join us. But to the rest of us any town just meant plunder, it meant women and gold. And it turned out, none of the Lucerians wanted to join another revolt against Rome, or at least not a revolt led by slaves.

Varro

They probably remembered the civil war. It had only been ten years since Sulla tried to exterminate the Samnites for siding with Marius. They lost a whole generation of men.

Crixus

Oh, you couldn't get Trebatius to stop talking about the Samnite wars with Rome, and especially Sulla. But the men in those towns by then were half Romans, and Trebatius wasn't much more than another bandit to them.

So we surrounded this village, and while they were negotiating at the front gate, sending heralds back and forth, some of us fired their walls. It was only a wooden palisade. As soon as the rest of our army realized what was going on, they rushed in and joined us sacking the place.

Spartacus was furious. He ordered the looting to stop, but the whole army ignored him, even most of the Samnites once they realized they were missing out on the best plunder. His face got that stone look to it, and you can't argue with a stone. He kept saying, "I gave orders." And, "If we don't have discipline, we don't have an army, we only have a mob!"

Maybe I'd heard that one too many times. And worse, it was Trebatius agreeing with him, saying yes, men should be flogged, men should be executed to set an example to the rest of the army, to teach the barbarians what discipline means.

That was the moment the gods of *hybris* were waiting for. I pulled my sword and challenged Trebatius. "If you want executions, why don't you just start with me, here and now?"

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Well, Trebatius was either stupid or brave, because he started to pull his own weapon, but Spartacus pulled him back before I could spit him like a pig for roasting. Then it was Spartacus and I facing each other, both with drawn steel, and Spartacus was saying, "Maybe I should start with you, Crixus. They were your men who started the looting. Maybe killing you will teach them to follow orders, for a change."

And I answered him, "Maybe you ought to try it. Maybe we'll see who really ought to be leading this army."

I don't know what would have happened then if Castus hadn't got between us and pulled us off each other. Only another gladiator could have done that, and lived.

Varro

Then you didn't fight?

Crixus

No. I thank the gods for that.

Varro

Do you think you might have killed him?

Crixus

I don't know. He was good with a Thracian sword, I was good. We only met once in the arena, and I had the victory, that time. But there's no way to tell, now. My blood was up. I think even then I knew he was right, but I wouldn't admit it, not to myself, not to him, not in front of the others.

Varro

Sometimes I think there are moments in the affairs of men when events are balanced on a cusp. As if you were to throw a boulder into a stream and alter its course. All events from that point on would happen differently, and history as we know it would never have taken place.

Crixus

You mean if I'd killed Spartacus that day, you wouldn't be writing your history books now? Maybe so. But then who could ever know how things would have come out, otherwise? Except maybe the gods.

And maybe he might have killed me, instead.

But it didn't happen. They pulled us apart, we finally cooled off enough to talk, and I decided to take my men and leave his army. Spartacus agreed.

At the time, it seemed the best idea. To both of us. But we were breaking the oath that we took together on Vesuvius, to fight together until death. The gods don't forgive men so easily for that.

So here you see where you were wrong in your book. We didn't plan all along to split our forces and trap the Romans between us, we split our forces because I was a fool, just what Spartacus had called me.

Varro

You're talking about the battle on Mount Garganus now.

Crixus

That's right. The real fact is, I almost got half our men killed on Garganus, I almost destroyed our army. None of us knew at the time that Rome had just raised four new legions to hunt us down, that they were already on the march. But I doubt if I would have cared. I was full of *hybris* then, thinking I was another Brennus. I had thirty thousand men

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under my command, all Gauls and Germans, we'd beaten the Romans before, we could beat them again. So I told myself.

We raided and plundered our way across Apulia, and the smoke of burning villas led the Romans right to us. They took us completely unprepared. We never bothered to set up a walled camp the way Spartacus had trained us to do—that was too much trouble. We had no sentries posted to keep watch—everyone wanted to be in on the looting, instead.

It was the Roman cavalry that hit us first, at least five hundred of them. They charged through us, killing right and left. Worse, they drove off most of our horses with them. My men were running for their weapons, for their armor and shields, but the thought of taking formation was nowhere in their minds.

Of course five hundred cavalry against thirty thousand of us—they weren't really a threat. But I wasn't a complete fool; I knew they were only scouts and that somewhere, close by, there must be a whole Roman army. The horsemen would be leading them right to us. I didn't know how far away they were, how long we had. Finally, I did what I should have done all along. I gave the signal to form up and tried to get the men into order as fast as possible.

We were in open country, which always favors the Romans in battle. The villa and the farm buildings we might have used for a defensive position were already ashes. Digging in might take too long—the Romans might be on us at any minute. But I could see Mount Garganus to the east, not more than twenty miles away—less than a day's march. Fighting in the mountains was what we were used to. I decided to retreat to the hills.

Only I couldn't get the men into order. They all had too much baggage. Every man was weighed down with plunder—carts full of it, sacks loaded with it, slaves—and none of them wanted to leave any of it behind, even when the Romans had driven off their pack animals. They wouldn't listen to orders, not until the Roman cavalry came back for another strike. That got them moving, at least.

The damned cavalry harried us every step of the way, trying to cut us off, trying to delay us until their legions could march up in force. Time and again, they attacked—charging in, picking off a few men, then riding off. We had too few horsemen of our own to go after them. There was nothing we could do to stop them, no time to halt and take a stand. That was what they were trying to make us do. And all the baggage was slowing us down even more than the Romans, the ox carts and the donkeys loaded with it could only plod along. The men—loaded with it—couldn't keep a close formation on the march, and strung out the way they were, they were easy targets for the Roman cavalry.

I was all in a sweat, afraid that the next time I looked back, it would be a whole Roman army marching down on us. I finally ordered my men to abandon all the spoils, leave the baggage behind, every bit of it, except for provisions. I rode up and down the line of march, forcing men to get rid of their loot, to pick up the pace. I took the heads off a few of them who tried to argue with me. There just wasn't the time for it. For twenty miles, our back trail was marked by discarded baggage, strayed cattle, and the bodies of stragglers.

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Most of the men who lived, learned. To keep up with the march, to keep formation. I could only think how Spartacus had told us, over and over: a cohort in good order, armed with spears, can fight off any cavalry attack. The Romans knew it, too. They concentrated on picking off the stragglers, the men who dropped out of line, the men slowed down by trying to carry their plunder with them, against orders. I'd lost hundreds of them by the time we'd reached the Garganus hills, but they were already a better army because of it.

We reached a good defensible position before the Romans caught up with us, and we started to dig in. I knew we wouldn't be safe until we put up a wall between us and the enemy. This time, even after the whole day on the march, even when night fell, I heard no complaints from the men about digging ditches, building up ramparts, cutting wood, and hauling stone.

The Roman army marched up in formation the next morning and started to put up their own camp near the foot of the mountain. I wasn't too worried, not even then. We had more than twice the men they did and we had the high ground.

Maybe I was overconfident. Maybe if it was Spartacus in command instead of me, everything would have been different. But I was looking down at the Romans with their camp only half-started, and it seemed to me I'd never have a better chance to attack, to hit them first. To take them off-guard if I could. It had to be quick, it had to be sudden. My men were tired but eager to fight, to strike back after the cavalry harassment on the march.

Because of the terrain, with a ravine on our right, we were crowded together on a narrow front. There wasn't room to keep the cohorts in order, we were massed hundreds of men deep. I ordered the men to spread out and form up when we reached the bottom of the slope, but by then things were too confused.

We charged in a body down the mountainside. The first thing that went wrong was, the Roman lookouts spotted us coming and gave the alarm. The legionaries dropped their shovels and tools, grabbed their weapons and shields, and formed up before we could reach their position. Then in some places, especially on our left, the slope was too steep and our men couldn't keep together. The center and right were still bunched up deep, and men were running into each other, fighting each other for a chance to get out front and be one of the first to strike the enemy. No one was thinking about taking formation.

When we hit them, their center buckled and fell back under the weight of our numbers, but they didn't break. Our right was pushing them back, too, and for a while the momentum seemed to be with us. But before we could crush them, the damned Roman cavalry came charging out of nowhere and hit our left flank. We had plenty of men in the rear who hadn't got into the battle yet, and I tried to order them over to the left and reinforce the breach. But behind the cavalry it looked like it was another entire Roman legion coming up. I tried to get my men turned around to face them, but they were too slow to react, or they never heard the signal. The reinforcements gave the Romans heart and stiffened their spines. And some of my men started to lose theirs.

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I decided to retreat while we could. We fought our way back up the mountain to our walls and held them off when they came after us. I still wasn't too worried. Our position was good, and even though we'd lost a lot of men, so had the Romans.

But then they started to work—digging ditches, raising walls below us at the foot of the mountain. I tried to send a cohort out through the ravine to get behind their position, but it was so narrow and choked with brush the men could only go single file. And the Romans had the other end blocked already. Before I knew what was happening, we were trapped. They surrounded us, they put up their own walls around us to keep us from breaking out. What's that called, in Latin?

Varro

Contravallation.

Crixus

Right. A Roman word. Even before the walls were done, they brought up catapults. The stones struck our walls or flew over them and killed the men behind them. One of them killed Gannicus. We picked up the stones and used them to build our own walls higher, but we had no way to throw them back, no catapults and no way to make them, no tools.

I knew we couldn't stand a siege. There wasn't shelter on the mountain against the cold, that time in the season. More important, provisions were short. Too much baggage abandoned on the road, and I can't tell you how many men had filled their packs with gold instead of corn. I sent out foraging parties at night, but most of them never came back—whether they were caught or deserted, I don't know. And every day we waited, the Roman ditch just got deeper, their walls higher.

I still had one advantage: from the top of the mountain we could spot the Romans whenever they tried to infiltrate our lines. We fought them off, more than once. Then a sentry came to me one morning and said he'd spotted a new army approaching from the north-west. At first I thought it was more Romans, come to finish us off. I ordered the men to stand ready for another assault on our walls, but I was sure that this time it would be the last.

Then I saw it wasn't a Roman army. It was Spartacus. Somehow, he'd learned the Romans had us under siege and marched all that way across Apulia to relieve us. That was the first time we killed a Roman consul in battle. Gellius, wasn't that his name?

Varro

Lucius Gellius Publicola.

Crixus

When it was over, I swallowed all my *hybris* and got down on my knees in front of Spartacus. I swore a new oath: wherever he wanted to lead, whatever orders he gave, I would follow. I'd thought that I'd wanted to be a commander, lead an army of my own, but I'd learned better and almost lost thirty thousand men doing it. From that day, I left the command to him.

Varro

What did he say to you?

Crixus

He said, "What did you think I'd do when I heard the Romans had you

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under siege? Should I turn my back and let you all be killed? Don't you remember, we swore an oath together."

Gods, I loved that man. He was right, I was a fool. But I never left him again. Not while he was alive. The gods know I would have died to save him, but I didn't get that chance.

After Garganus, there were no more complaints about discipline. No one could say we weren't a real army, a hundred thousand men strong, all armed and equipped and trained. We crossed back over the Apennines, back into Samnite country. There was another consular army waiting for us there in the mountains, trying to block the passes that lead to Rome. We managed to trap them there instead. We didn't bother to hunt down the survivors, there were so few of them. The consul escaped, though. That's one head I never got.

Varro

That was Lentulus. He made it back to Rome, but the senate stripped him of his command. That's when they started talking seriously about recalling armies from the provinces. There was no Roman army between Spartacus and Rome. The city was almost undefended.

Then, of course, Crassus stepped in.

Crixus

Crassus, I remember him. The man who was going to save Rome from Spartacus. It was a different kind of fighting, once we met him. It was what Spartacus had been telling us all along, one day we were going to come up against veteran legions.

Varro

Crassus raised his own army. He was the richest man in Rome, so he could afford to pay for volunteers, retired legionaries to fight under his command.

Crixus

I think I'd be ashamed to be a Roman if I demanded pay before I'd defend my own city.

Varro

Crassus had political ambitions. He wanted to recruit an army that would be loyal to him after the war. The man who defeated Spartacus and saved Rome could be sure of election as consul the next year. There was even some talk in the senate of making him dictator, but they settled for appointing him to take the rest of Gellius' term as consul.

Crixus

Well, Crassus did put up a good fight. I don't suppose he had much choice in his strategy. He had to stand between us and Rome. Between us and Capua first, as it happened. Capua—back where we started from. Less than a year after we broke out of Batiatus' gladiator school.

Varro

You crucified more Romans at Capua.

Crixus

Capua . . .

I'll tell you about Capua. Just a few days before we got there, we took Pompeii. You know, when you're a gladiator, they send you around on the circuit to the big shows: Capua, Pompeii, Rome. We had men who knew

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the streets in Pompeii—Castus and Felix did. They led a few dozen men over the walls at night, straight to the biggest gladiator schools, and broke them out, hundreds of the best fighters in the world with all their arms and weapons. They took the gates from the inside and held them open for the rest of us. We hardly lost a man taking Pompeii.

We were heading north straight up the Appian road, so it was just a couple days' march before we got to Capua. Well, Crassus had his army there to meet us in front of the city gates. He had six or eight legions, I think, besides the Capuans who came out to stand with him. We had almost three times that number, and they were all battle-hardened men by that time. And disciplined, after what happened at Mount Garganus.

Of course most of us knew Capua—the gladiators, I mean. This time I was the one who led the strike force to break into the city where the walls weren't so well-defended, the way we'd done at Pompeii. But when we got to the gladiator schools, they were already dead. Every gladiator in the city. The Capuans murdered them so they couldn't escape and join us. And not just the gladiators. They killed the public slaves, even some of their household slaves, the able-bodied men. I don't know how many altogether. Thousands. Thousands of them murdered.

Varro

But of course they were afraid to have so many dangerous men at large inside their walls.

Crixus

I still call it murder, to slaughter men when they're locked up in chains and defenseless. Not for what they did, but what they might do.

Well, our blood was up, then. We took off our legionary gear and armed ourselves as gladiators. The main battle was still going on outside the city, near the front gate. Crassus had his army formed up with the walls at his back. He was holding off Spartacus' assault, but when the Romans saw the gates open behind them and a horde of gladiators charging out, they panicked and broke.

Crassus got away, himself, but we captured his pay chest—it was too heavy for two strong men to lift. And the loot from Capua—that whole town was rich on gladiators' blood, and we took it back. We figured we deserved it.

We burned Capua to the ground, but before that we sacked the place and crucified every citizen we could find. Then we staged another set of games in the Capuan arena, the same place so many of us had fought as slaves. This time, though, we let the Crassus' legionaries do all the dying.

I remember what you called it in your book—an atrocity, an outrage. It was justice, to us. A just revenge.

Varro

A few of the survivors made it to Rome. They told the senate what had happened there. Some people started to kill their slaves in Rome, too.

The whole city was in a panic like a nest of ants under a rotten log, when you lift it up. The senate was offering sacrifices, consulting the Sibylline books to find a prophecy that might save Rome.

Crixus

That reminds me—one strange thing that happened in Capua. You know Spartacus' woman was a seeress?

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Varro

I know men said she was.

Crixus

She called herself Olympias and said she was a priestess of Bacchus, one of those Greek cults. But she was just a Thracian, a barbarian like the rest of us. Her arms were tattooed with snakes. Her breasts, too—she liked to wear them bare when she led the rites. When we were still in the gladiator school, she had a vision of Spartacus crowned with a snake. Then, she said it meant victory in the arena. But later she claimed he was destined to conquer Rome.

Well, at Capua we took a prisoner who was one of Crassus' legates, one of your patrician class. This one was arrogant even for a Roman. When we sent him into the arena to fight, he refused—unless he was matched up with Spartacus himself. He challenged Spartacus to single combat!

Then he made all kinds of crazy threats, said he was going to crucify us all—he said he was captured once by pirates, and after he was ransomed he came back with his own army and crucified every one of the pirates, and he'd do the same to us.

Varro

I think I know who that had to be—young Caesar. That sounds like something he'd do. Gods, there's another one who was ambitious, well beyond his years! That story about the pirates was true, you know. So, did Spartacus fight him?

Crixus

No, at Capua this Caesar was the one who was crucified. I never heard a man curse the way he did, hanging nailed up on a cross. I think he invoked every dark god in Tartarus! It made my hair stand on end to hear him.

That night, while he was still up on the cross, Olympias had a dream about him—Caesar, if that was his name. She saw snakes crawling out of the eye sockets of his skull. The vision bothered her so, she wouldn't leave Capua until she saw them put a spear through his belly to make sure he was dead. I think she laid some kind of spell to bind him in his grave, too.

Varro

Did you know he was one of Rome's high priests?

Crixus

Was he? At his age? Does that make his curse more potent? Well, he cursed Spartacus and Spartacus is dead, but so is he, for all the good it did him and his ambitions.

Varro

Did you believe in her prophecies, this seeress? Did you think Spartacus was destined to conquer Rome?

Crixus

A lot of us believed it, at the time. It always makes you feel good to think you have Fate on your side. I don't think Spartacus ever really did, though. But the rest of us, by that time we were all ready to march on Rome behind him.

Varro

I remember all the messages coming from the senate. Every day they expected Spartacus to show up in front of the walls.

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Crixus

Well, we could hardly just march right up to the walls. Don't forget, Crassus was still out there with the rest of his army. Retreating ahead of us, doing everything he could to delay us. He was persistent, Crassus was. He slowed us down. Until he was killed at Praeneste, we had to fight for every mile. But still he didn't save Rome.

Varro

They made him a hero of the Republic, you know, even so. His statue is right next to Fabius, who saved the city from Hannibal. Every year there's a festival in his honor.

But I'll tell you something. Thirty years ago, when I wrote my book, I couldn't say this. But now I almost think it might have been for the best that Crassus was killed before he could seek the consulship. He was too ambitious. He had the money, but it wasn't enough for him—he wanted power. With those legions he'd bought, I'm afraid he might have made himself another Marius, another Sulla. The Roman Republic survived Hannibal and Spartacus, but I don't know if we could have survived another civil war.

You see, I remember when Magnus got the order from the senate to break off his operations against Sertorius and come back to defend Rome from Spartacus. He threw it into the fire.

Crixus

Wait a minute. Who is this Magnus?

Varro

Pompeius. That's what we called him then, Magnus—Pompeius the Great. I was on his staff in Hispania during the campaign against Sertorius and his rebels. After five years of war, he was finally getting the advantage of Sertorius. He was already planning his triumph. And at first, as I said, when he got the recall order from Rome, he refused to go. He thought it was a plot by his enemies in the senate to rob him of his triumph, just to put down a slave uprising. He burned the order and said he'd run his sword through any man who mentioned it again. He cursed the senate, but most of all, he cursed Crassus, for trying to steal his glory.

What I'm saying is, Magnus wasn't the kind of man to let Crassus take place ahead of him. And his legions were loyal to him even more than Crassus' men were. I think it would have been another civil war between those two, Pompeius against Crassus. Marius and Sulla all over again, fighting over Rome like dogs over a bone.

Crixus

If Crassus had saved Rome, you mean. If he hadn't been killed, trying.

Varro

Of course Magnus didn't know at the time that Crassus was dead. After he heard that Spartacus had burned Rome, it was another matter. Then, he couldn't wait to be one who put an end to the threat of Spartacus. But he still vowed he was going to come back to Hispania after he'd crucified all the gladiators, and take on Sertorius all over again.

Crixus

It sounds like he was afflicted with *hybris,* too.

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Varro

It's been very common in Rome, I'm afraid.

But what about Spartacus? What were his ambitions? This is the question I've spent thirty years trying to answer, and it's still an enigma. He was at the gates of Rome. Crassus was dead, his army broken. The city was defenseless at his feet. But he torched it and marched away. Why?

Crixus

It wasn't easy to decide, I can tell you that. Of course some of us wanted to take Rome. But what then? What if we took Rome? We couldn't keep it, couldn't hold it. We all knew by that time that the senate was recalling the legions from the provinces. We would have been trapped there, behind the walls, surrounded. That wasn't the kind of war we knew how to fight.

Varro

Even Hannibal never tried to take Rome.

Crixus

Hannibal, when he got tired of fighting Rome, he could pack up his army and go home to Carthage. We had nowhere, that was the problem. We started out just a few dozen gladiators trying to escape from Capua. By the time we reached Rome, we had an army of a hundred thousand men, we could beat any legion they could send against us in the open field, but we still had nowhere to go.

So sure, some of the men—barbarians and bandits, most of them—they wanted to sack the place, they kept talking about all the gold and women in Rome. But I'll tell you something, there's a limit on how much plunder you can carry. After we sacked places like Pompeii and Capua, we had to leave half the loot behind us, there weren't enough carts and pack animals to haul it with us. Not to mention the fodder for them.

You should know what I'm talking about, you've been on the march in enemy territory, you know what it takes to keep an army going. You need someplace to take all that loot, someplace secure to pile it up, otherwise it's no good to you. And that's what we didn't have.

At the worst, you could have marched back to Rome, but where could we go?

Some men wanted to go back to the mountains, to Samnite territory, but we already knew the towns there wouldn't support us. Some—mostly the Gauls and Germans—wanted to go north to the Alps, out of Italia, back to their homelands, out of the reach of Rome. Only there was no place out of the reach of Rome. Roman armies in Gallia, Romans in Thracia, Romans in Syria, Africa, Graecia. And nearly half of our people were Samnites, Italians—where could they go?

Worse, it would have split up the army. If there was one thing I learned at Mount Garganus, it was before everything else, the important thing is to keep the army together, no matter what. As long as we were together, there wasn't a Roman army that could beat us.

Varro

But you were beaten, in the end.

Crixus

It wasn't any Roman army that beat us, it was treachery.

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Varro

All right, now we come to it. You set Rome on fire and marched away, heading for Hispania. To join Sertorius there. Why? What made Spartacus decide to trust Sertorius?

Crixus

Well, like I said, we needed a place to go, a place where Rome couldn't reach. We needed to keep the army together. That meant joining Rome's enemies. We either had to go east to Mithridates in Asia or west to Sertorius in Hispania.

Trebatius argued for Sertorius. The Samnites had fought for Marius in the civil war against Sulla, and everyone knew that Sertorius was Marius' man. The Samnites all wanted to go to Hispania and join Sertorius.

Varro

Do you blame Trebatius for what happened?

Crixus

There was no way he could have known Sertorius would betray us all. And the Samnites died along with the rest of us. He sold them out, too.

But you'd know about Sertorius—you said you were there, you fought against him in Hispania, with Pompeius. He was a traitor to Rome. Was he used to betraying his own allies?

Varro

Even his enemies always considered Sertorius an honorable man, despite everything. It's another irony, if you'd have it: Sertorius was a Roman, first of all, but his loyalties in the civil war made him a traitor to Rome. As you say, he was always Marius' man. The very last of Marius' men. When Marius fell, they were all either killed or outlawed by Sulla—I suppose some had turned to banditry like this Trebatius of yours, but the rest had nowhere to go but Africa or Hispania.

What I don't think Spartacus and the rest of you understood at the time was that Sertorius was having a hard time of it by the time you escaped from Capua. For years, he'd been ruling Hispania as if it were his own kingdom, wearing out one Roman army after another, but Pompeius Magnus was finally a match for him. His people were growing tired of war. There was even a conspiracy among some of the officers on his staff to mutiny. This was something I didn't learn until years afterward, but if it's true, the very same day they meant to carry out the mutiny, Sertorius got word from Rome about a slave uprising in Italia and never came to the banquet where they were planning to kill him. It saved his life.

Crixus

We did know he was losing ground to Pompeius. That was one reason we chose to join him—we figured Sertorius needed our army as much as we needed him. And he promised us lands of our own. Good land, that the Romans had settled. It's a fine country, Hispania. I could have lived there the rest of my life. In peace, if the Romans would have let us.

But Sertorius lied. He sold us out to the Romans.

Varro

There's one story about Sertorius I think you should have known before you trusted him.

During the civil war, when Marius was hard-pressed by Sulla, he freed

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about four thousand slaves to fight on his side. They helped him take Rome, they became his personal army, called the Bardyiae. His personal executioners. Marius turned obsessive in his old age, obsessed with revenge on his enemies. He executed anyone he even suspected of plotting against him. The Bardyiae did that work for him. Eventually they got out of control and murdered indiscriminately, anyone they pleased, without permission. They killed men in their own homes, raped their wives and butchered their children. No one in Rome was safe from them, no one dared act against them or even complain, for fear of Marius. Not until Sertorius surrounded their camp one night with his own men and slaughtered them all. No one else would have dared, for fear of Marius.

The story wasn't widely known. Sertorius didn't want it told at the time, because Marius was still alive and . . . not rational. Then, not long afterward, Marius died, Sulla took power in Rome and started to kill all *his* enemies. Sertorius fled to Hispania to save himself. But ever since that time he always had the strongest possible antipathy to the notion of armed slaves, of freeing slaves to fight. He never availed himself of this expediency, even when he was hard-pressed by his enemies.

But I don't suppose Spartacus knew. Or I doubt if he would have trusted Sertorius.

Crixus

None of us knew that. You're right, it would have made a difference. We could have gone east, instead, to join up with King Mithridates and his armies. We should have. Everything would have been different, then.

Varro

The thing is this: all those years in exile, fighting Rome, Sertorius never really wanted his own kingdom. All he really wanted was to go home, to take his place again at Rome. He was growing old. His mother had died. And his enemy Sulla was finally dead.

Few people know this, but more than once while we were campaigning against him, Sertorius sent letters to Magnus offering to surrender if only he could have a pardon and return to Rome. Not just at the end, when he was starting to lose everything. Even after his victories. I know, I read the letters. *I would rather live as the lowest class of Roman citizen than remain in exile, even as the ruler of the world.* All he needed was a way to expiate his treason and clear his name.

Crixus

By betraying us. And betraying the men of Hispania who fought for him so long—selling them back into the hands of Rome. But I suppose it's not treachery to a Roman if his victims are only barbarians and slaves.

Varro

Of course Magnus had always turned his offers down, before. The senate would never have agreed to pardon Sertorius. But when he offered us Spartacus and his whole army, the price was finally high enough.

And to Magnus, it was as if the gods had come down from Olympus to guarantee his triumph, giving him Sertorius and Spartacus at one blow.

Crixus

You were there, weren't you? You fought in that battle.

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Varro

Yes, I was there. The hardest fighting I ever saw—and the last. I almost lost this leg, and from then on, I let it be my excuse for staying home and writing my books.

Crixus

I could tell. From your book, I knew you had to be there. Any man who lived through that day had the gods looking out for him. The crows must have feasted for months afterward!

Varro

So I got that part right, at least?

Crixus

Reading it, it was like I was there again, seeing the same battle from the other side, while you stood there and waited for Sertorius to make his move.

Of course we never knew what was coming. We trusted Sertorius. We did have one warning, though. From the gods.

The night before, Spartacus' woman Olympias had a dream: she told him that if he fought the next day, it would be his last battle, he would be killed.

He told her, "It doesn't matter if I die tomorrow, if it's really our last battle, as long as we never have to fight another. As long as we win." Which turned out to be true, that it was his last battle, but not in the way he meant it.

Because he trusted Sertorius.

Varro

Magnus *didn't* trust Sertorius. Not entirely. That's why he held six cohorts out of the battle in reserve, just in case. He knew the old fox too well. After all, if he could betray one side, he could betray the other.

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It all went according to plan, but it wasn't just waiting, I can tell you that! Remember, we had to stand there and let Spartacus' whole army charge into us! I'd never come up against an army that size! We were all remembering those reports of Spartacus' victories in Italia, the men crucified, the other atrocities. I could feel my guts churning the whole time you were advancing. But of course I couldn't put any of that in a book.

We watched you march closer and closer to us, while Sertorius held his own army back on your right flank. Then you charged the last distance, crushed our front lines. Before Sertorius finally made his move, even Magnus was getting worried.

Crixus

But your Romans stood fast. I'll say that much for them, Pompeius' army was the hardest we ever fought. Harder than Crassus'. Still, we could have won that day. We could have beat Pompeius.

Varro

I won't say you're wrong. You were pushing us hard. We were trapped between the river on our right and Sertorius's army on the left, while you crushed the center.

Crixus

Instead, we were the ones who were trapped. We kept waiting for him to wheel his army around into position to hit your left flank. That was supposed to be the key to the whole battle.

I remember thinking, what was he waiting for, what was the delay? I saw him give the signal, I saw his army start to charge, I thought—We've got them now!

Then, at first, I couldn't quite figure what was wrong, what he was doing. Then he hit us. With his cavalry first—he had good cavalry. By the time we got regrouped and turned around to face him, it was too late. The Romans broke through the middle of our lines—but you know all that. You were there.

We got Sertorius, though. I wish I could say I killed him myself, but I did see his head, while it was still recognizable.

Varro

And Spartacus? What happened to him?

Crixus

In your book, you say he was killed in the battle.

Varro

We assumed he was. But we never found his body. We searched for him—even the river, downstream. Some men said they saw him go down fighting, but we were never sure.

Crixus

He would have died fighting. That was our vow. And the prophecy. As far as I ever knew, he was killed in the battle that day. I do like to think he might have been the one who killed Pompeius, though.

Varro

I suppose he could have been. I didn't see it. Things were confused after Magnus was killed, and I was on the ground with my leg half-off, trying not to bleed to death.

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At least we got him his triumph, posthumously. His bones driven in his gold chariot along the Sacred Way, while the crowds cheered. It was what he wanted more than anything, the last thing his men could do for him. But there weren't many prisoners in his parade. And no Spartacus.

Crixus

Better to die fighting, better than surrender to face a cross. That's what we always told ourselves.

Varro

It took a while to persuade the senate to allow the triumph, but I suspect most of them were relieved that Pompeius Magnus was gone. Someone—I think it was Cicero—said a triumph was a small price to pay for keeping Rome free from another king, to preserve the Republic.

It would have come to that, I think, if he'd returned alive to a triumph with both Sertorius and Spartacus in chains. I don't think anything could have stopped him then. Another king of Rome, in my lifetime.

But it didn't happen. Rome was spared another civil war, and the Republic still stands, because of Spartacus.

Crixus

And if Spartacus still lived? Would that change anything?

I think about twenty thousand of us survived the battle and made it all the way to Asia.

We enlisted with King Mithridates to fight the Romans, and I've been fighting them ever since. The way Spartacus would be, if he was still alive. The way my sons are, now.

Maybe it would have all ended differently if we'd never trusted Sertorius, if we'd gone east instead of west, to Asia instead of Hispania. Maybe Mithridates would have made Spartacus commander of all his armies, and we would have conquered Rome. Maybe I would have married Queen Cleopatra of Egypt and I'd be sitting next to her on the throne right now.

But I think the gods spin out the thread of our fates from the beginning, and there's no changing it. I can't believe in your boulder blocking the stream of events.

The gods don't let it happen. The stream just flows past the boulder and follows the same bed all the way to the sea.

We burned Rome, we killed a lot of Romans, but what real difference did it make? Everything we did, all our battles and victories from Capua to Hispania, and Pompeius had his triumph, after all, even after we killed him.

Now it's thirty years later and Rome is rebuilt, richer than it ever was. Capua, too, and the gladiator shows are even bigger than they used to be. Crassus and Pompeius are both dead, but their sons are still both trying to rule the Roman Republic, and they're still making war on the sons of Mithridates in Asia.

And tomorrow I'll be going back in the arena again so Roman crowds can see the last surviving *Spartacanus* fight to the death, even if he is an old man.

Everything we did, and nothing has really changed at all. ○

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ORIGAMI ROCKETS

They float to the moon
in origami rockets.
Astronauts from

a childhood fantasy.
The moon smells
like a green apple.

They walk freely
on its skin without
helmets or spacesuits.

They build a town.
Stores and houses.
Schools and libraries.

A street fair with
lots of free parking.
And the moon people

come to live there.
Up from their craters
and their moon caves.

A gentle sleepy race.
Just the right sort
to carry our dreams.

—Bruce Boston

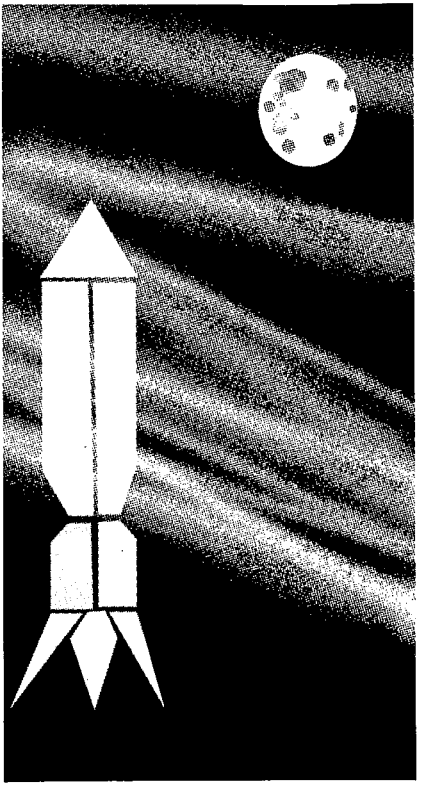

Illustration by June Levine

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THE VETERAN

Neal Asher

The author tells us he was born in 1961 in Essex, Great Britain, and still lives there with his wife Caroline. His love of the strange began on hearing *The Hobbit,* and then reading *Lord of the Rings*. It was encouraged by his parents—both SF aficionados. "Over twenty years have passed since I first started banging away on a manual typewriter (PC now), but then nothing worthwhile comes easy. Through years of grind I've crawled my way up the writing ladder, through the small presses, and have had numerous short stories, collections, and novellas published. Now Pan Macmillan has brought out *Gridlinked, The Skinner, The Line of Polity,* and *Cowl*." The company is spreading his books worldwide. The first two novels are available in the United States and Germany, and will soon be available in France.

Cheel had nearly escaped when she saw the man take off his face. She was sure she'd lost Croven's boys on the landing dock, but hid amongst plasmesh packing crates long enough to be certain. As a further precaution, she took a roundabout route to the terminal, to catch the ferry to the Scarbe side of the river. And there he was:

Seated on a bollard, the man contemplatively removed his pipe, as if to tamp it down or relight it. Instead, he placed it stem down in the top pocket of his shirt, then reached up and pressed his fingers against his cheekbone and forehead. His face came away from his hairline, round behind his ears, down to a point just above his Adam's apple. The inside of his mouth and much of his sinus were also part of the prosthesis, so only bare eyeballs in the upper jut of his skull remained—the rest being the black spikes and plates of bio-interfaces.

Cheel gaped. From another pocket, the man took some sort of tool and began to probe inside the back of his detached face. He put the prosthesis in his lap, then took up his pipe and placed it in his throat sphincter. Smoke

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bled from between the interface plates of his cheeks. His bare eyeballs swiveled toward Cheel then back down to the adjustments he was making. She suddenly realized who this must be. Here was the veteran who worked on the ferry. Here was one of the few survivors from a brutal war between factions of dense-tech humans. Not understanding what was impelling her, she walked out on the jetty and approached him.

The veteran ignored her until after removing his pipe from his throat and replacing his face. The prosthesis engaged with a sucking click. Perhaps, without his face, he just could not speak?

"And what is your name?" he asked patronizingly.

"Cheel."

With the same tool he had used on the back of his face, he contemplatively scraped out his pipe. After repacking it with tobacco from his belt-pouch, he ignited it with a laser lighter. Puffed out a cloud of fragrant smoke.

"What can I do for you, Cheel?"

She didn't know what to say. She wanted to ask about dense tech, about star travel, if it was true he was over two hundred years old, and if it was true that the Straker nova, which grew in the sky every night, was the result of a star his kind detonated during a battle. But there was no time.

"Hey, Cheel!"

She felt a sudden flush of horror. Stupid to walk out on this jetty. Stupid to allow this momentary fascination to delay her escape. She turned and saw that her original pursuers were there, blocking her escape from the jetty. Glancing aside at the water of Big River, she saw suderdiles swimming past. Unusually for a girl raised in the river town of Slove-Scarbe, she could swim. She had learned out at the coast, when Grand Mam had been alive—but that skill would not help her here. Town residents didn't learn to swim because the survival rate in the river was less than thirty seconds.

"What do you want, Slog?" she asked.

By his expression, she guessed he wanted more than her immediate death. Discovering his cache of jewels missing, Croven must have quickly worked out that she had finally left him, and let Slog off the leash. But what the hell did he expect? As his sickness progressed, he became increasingly violent and unpredictable, and she did not want to die with him when one of his lieutenants finally took him down.

"You've been a really naughty girl, Cheel."

Slog, Croven's second, had killed three people that Cheel knew about. She looked behind her, hoping for some escape route, maybe a boat. The veteran was gone, though why he should hide, she had no idea—he was one who had nothing to fear from Slog and his kind. She drew her shiv and began to back up. Maybe if she lured them down this side of the jetty she could escape past on the other side, or across the top of the packing crates? Then more of Croven's gang arrived, and she knew there would be no escape. Suddenly, the horrible reality hit home, and she wanted to cry. They would rape her, all of them and for a long time, and if that didn't kill her, they would feed her to the suderdiles. She backed up further, came opposite the bollard on which the veteran had been sitting.

"What did you do?" asked the face, which was lying on top of the bollard.

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Cheel just stood there for a moment with her mouth moving and nothing coming out. Eventually: "I was just trying to get away from Croven." She neglected to mention Croven's cache of jewels in a hide roll hanging by cords from her shoulder.

"And what will they do to you?" asked the face.

"Rape me, then kill me."

"What's that, little bitch?" Slog directed others of Croven's gang to cover every way off the jetty. Beyond him, she saw Croven arrive—the lanky black-haired figure was difficult to mistake, especially with that wooden gait and unnatural posture. Could she appeal to him after her betrayal?

"Nothing," said Cheel. "Nothing at all." She glanced at the face.

It winked at her, then said, "Pick me up and turn me toward them."

What did she have to lose?

As she snatched up the prosthesis, Slog drew his Compac airgun and aimed it low. He wasn't going to kill her, just smash a kneecap if she put up too much of a fight. She'd seen him do that before. His expression was nasty, grinning, then suddenly it changed to confusion when he saw what she held.

"What do you think?" the face asked, vibrating in her hand. "Slog is a pathetically descriptive name for him."

"I don't—" Cheel began.

Something flashed, iridescent. A sound, as of a giant clearing its throat, rent the air. Slog froze, a horizontal line traversing down the length of his body, searing him from head to foot. Then he moved and flame broke from pink cracks appearing in his black skin. His air gun burst with a dull thrump, took his hand away. He held the stump up before his liquefying eyes and started screaming. Croven came swiftly up behind him, turned him and shoved. Slog screamed in the water, his blackened skin slewing away. Cheel didn't see the suderdile that took him. One moment he was splashing in reddish froth, then he was gone.

The face vibrated in Cheel's hands. "Croven, the girl is coming with me to the Skidbladnir, and that was in the nature of a warning to you and your gang."

Croven stared in horror down into the water, then at his glistening hands. Then, seemingly jerked into motion, he made a circular motion in the air with the point of his finger. Gang members began retreating from the jetty, heading away.

"Why *her*?" He suddenly turned to stare at the face. "Is that part of you not prosthetic as well?"

"Ah, Croven," said the face. "The thing about power is that you don't have to justify what you do with it. Surely you know that already."

Croven nodded, turned away briefly, then turned back to gaze directly at Cheel. "I wasn't going to kill you. I love you."

Cheel believed him, but was very aware of his use of "wasn't." Now, because of her causing Slog's death, even if indirectly, Croven would not be able to back down. He waited for her to say something, and, when she did not, he headed away.

"What now?" Cheel asked, when all of the gang were no longer in sight.

"Now, carrying my face, you walk to the ferry."

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Cheel began walking, realizing as she did so that in engaging so completely with the talking face, she had momentarily forgotten that it was only the veteran's prosthesis.

"Where are you?" she asked, as she reached the end of the jetty.

"Never you mind. Just keep walking to the terminal. I was right to assume you were heading for the Scarbe side?"

"You were."

Cheel saw no sign of Croven or his gang, but knew that they were very likely lurking nearby. Ducking her head down, and tucking the prosthesis under her arm next to the jewel roll, she hurried toward the looming shape of the skid ferry, or the Skidbaldnir, as the veteran called it. She half expected a slug from an air gun to slam into her at any moment, if not vengefully from Croven, then from one of the others, but none did. Sensibly, no one was attacking while the veteran remained invisible close by. Why did it have to come to this?

Time and again, she had pleaded with Croven to live out his remaining time on the coast with her. With his cache, they could have lived comfortably for some time, and then, as it ran out, she could have found work. She would have looked after him, nursed him to the end. But his choice to stay where ruthlessness and physical violence were the measure of a man meant that there could be only one ending. It was all right for him to choose a bloody end for himself. He had no right to choose it for *her,* too.

Soon, she reached the ferry ramp, where she groped in her pocket for her token, but it seemed that the veteran's face was token enough, and the guard waved her aboard. Avoiding the restaurant deck, because of the delicious smells and her lack of funds suitable to purchase what was sold there, Cheel went all the way up to the roof deck, and there, leaning against the balustrade, she kept an eye on the boarding ramps. A hand tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned to the faceless veteran, who was holding out his hand for his prosthesis.

"How is it you're not seen?" Cheel asked.

"Chameleonware." His face, its mouth still moving, again seated with that sucking click. Eyes now in place, where before there had been none, he gazed up at the sky and continued, "But in making myself invisible down here, I've made myself all too visible elsewhere. Though, admittedly, the proton flash was what attracted attention."

"Slog?"

"Yes." He turned to regard her. "The weapon I used to burn that piece of shit."

Cheel glanced up to where he had been gazing, and raised a querying eyebrow.

"Friends," he said. "Though I find it difficult to think of them as such. They let me rest to salve and repair what remains of my humanity, but by using my weapons to kill, I've told them I'm ready to take up my duties again. I don't think a quarter of a century is enough, but then, I don't think any time is long enough."

From below, she heard the clack of ratchets and loud clangs as the crew raised the ramps and secured them to the side of the vessel. Deep in the belly of the Skidbladnir, big diesel engines started rumbling.

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"What will happen?" Cheel knew she would have to get away from Scarbe as quickly as possible. The veteran had saved her, and right now protected her, but that would not—and could not—last. And Croven would come after her.

"They'll send a tral-sphere with tac updates and new mission parameters."

Cheel just nodded. She understood none of that, but did not want him to stop speaking. He was talking dense tech here, stuff about the war, and about technically advanced humans killing each other.

In steel cages behind them, vertical shafts began turning. These drove the big shiny grip wheels clamped on the thick ship-metal cable reaching from the Slove pylon behind them to the Scarbe pylon a kilometer across the river. The ferry began to ease out of dock. Dispersing suderdiles surfed a white water wave away from the bows. Cheel turned to gaze across the river to their destination.

"When will this tral-sphere arrive?" she asked.

The veteran smiled. "That you ask indicates that you have no idea what I'm talking about. The tral-sphere is, of course, already here. And so is the war, and so is the enemy, and so already is my plan."

A crewman saw him leap aboard, but showed no inclination to chase him down into the dank lower holds of the ferry. In the dim light admitted by a filthy portal into a long steel corridor, Croven drew his air gun from his belly holster and checked the load. He noted that his right hand was shaking—the added stress of the situation exacerbating the symptoms of his neurological disease. Damn Cheel for forcing this on him! Slog had quickly detected her inept theft, otherwise Croven could have let her go. But Slog and the others knowing meant that Croven *had* to order her immediate capture. For her theft from and betrayal of him, the minimum he could get away with, while retaining his status, would have been her humiliation and beating. Now, after what had happened to Slog, he must try to kill her, and the veteran. But Croven did not want to kill Cheel and doubted he *could* kill the veteran.

The gangs of Slove had long known that the veteran was untouchable. But this was the first time he had actually used one of his dense-tech weapons to kill. Before, it had always been one of his invisible visitations. Some offenders he gave a beating, others he threw in the river. Quite often they were like Croven: gang members who lived by a code allowing them to admit no fear. The veteran had killed Croven's lieutenant—and for that, Croven must exact vengeance. Knowing that going up against the veteran meant death did not excuse not making the attempt. Perhaps Croven should have listened to Cheel.

When she had first suggested leaving Slove and heading out to one of the coastal towns, Croven had given the idea serious consideration. He had been bored and here was a chance at a fresh start, new challenges. But the shakes had started about then, and medscan confirmed that something was wrong. He'd paid a researcher to find out what. After only a few hours of delving in the public com library, the researcher laid it out for him. Croven had a reversion disease: one of those ailments long con-

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sidered the province of historians by the bulk of humanity, but returning to bedevil primitive colonies like this one. Prognosis: no cure on this world.

Now the drugs that had alleviated some symptoms of his Parkinson's were becoming less and less effective. He estimated that he had a year as gang leader before someone took him down. He would have lasted longer in one of the coastal towns, but, after Cheel grew bored with his sickness and left him, he'd probably starve to death in the end. Croven preferred the idea of going out bloody. Perhaps now was the time.

"Croven." The voice had a metallic quality that made him think for one insane moment that the ferry was speaking to him.

"Veteran," he said at last. The man must have seen him board, and had now come after him in the invisible form. Croven turned sharply toward the length of corridor the voice had seemed to issue from, and fired half his ten-shot clip into the shadows. The slugs smacked and whined down into the darkness.

"I am not the veteran. I am his enemy." The voice grated in Croven's ear.

Then, suddenly, the ferry dipped and shuddered and some force picked Croven up and slammed him against a steel bulkhead. Now, with a reverberating clang, a curving black surface appeared, intersecting the floor and wall of the corridor. Croven saw that the portal had been shattered and realized that what held him had probably saved him from injury. He could hear yelling out there, screaming. A hatch irised open in the black surface to reveal gleaming tight-packed and squirming movement.

"Choose!" the voice hissed.

Something had slammed the thousands of tons of iron and steel of the ferry to one side and now it was groaning as it dragged back into position under the cable, and huge waves slapped its sides and washed the lower decks. The abrupt motion would have flung Cheel over the rail and into the jaws of the suderdiles had not the veteran wrapped an arm around her.

"What?" she gasped.

"That was fast," he said. "But not well-positioned."

A thunderclap now, and suddenly they were in shadow. A sphere had appeared. It was twenty meters across, jet black, and only three or four meters above them, its surface intersecting the grip-wheel gearboxes and the ship-metal cable. When it shifted slightly in relation to the ferry, severed cable snaked out of the clamping wheels, slammed down on the deck nearby, then slithered off the back of the ferry, taking most of the rear cast-iron balustrade with it.

"I guess I could have done better as well," the veteran observed.

Two of them, two of these tral spheres, Cheel realized. But where was the other one? She saw that the visible one had sheared the ferry's gearbox clean through. Thick gleaming oil slopped out and a couple of hypoid gears bounced across the deck. As she looked around, she guessed the location of the other one. People were screaming, some of them thrown into the water by the cataclysmic arrival of that first sphere *inside* the ferry. In horror, Cheel watched a woman trying to hold a baby up out of the wa-

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ter, away from the approaching suderdiles. Disconnected from the cable, the ferry was now turning, carried downstream by the strong current.

"There are people in the water!" Cheel exclaimed.

"Yes," the veteran shrugged. "People die."

Cheel stared at him in disbelief. She had discounted his previous callousness. He was two hundred years old, an advanced human, and she had thought he would be better than—something *more* than—people she knew.

"You don't care?"

"Of course he doesn't care." Cheel turned as Croven stepped up on deck. "We are primitives to him."

There was something seriously amiss with Croven. His skin was uniformly white and somehow dead, and only as he drew closer did she see that his eyes seemed to be plain steel balls.

"Ah, the automatics picked you up!" said the veteran. "They always make an assessment and choose one who is willing for conversion. What swung it, Croven, your pride and gangland honor, or the promise of a cure for what's eating out the inside of your head?"

Croven ignored the jibe. He concentrated on Cheel. "I've been recruited, and now, knowing I could kill you in an instant, I'm certain I don't want to." He looked at the veteran. "I know the enemy."

The air between Croven and the veteran was taut, telic, as something invisible probed and strained it. The feeling began to grow unbearable.

"Move aside." The veteran touched Cheel's shoulder.

The ferry was now hundreds of meters downstream from the crossing point, and there were no screams from the water anymore, just spreading red where grey suderdile flukes stirred and broke the surface. The visible sphere continued to hang like a balloon above the ferry. Then, there was a crashing from below, and the deck tilted. Cheel grabbed a drive shaft cage to stop herself sliding over. The other two remained upright, both now standing in mid air where the deck had been. A hundred meters out, the other sphere folded out of the air with a thunderous crash. A hole opened in its side, revealing gleaming movement.

"Had I not been your enemy before you stepped into that tral-sphere, I would be now." The veteran shrugged—a strangely out of place action from someone floating off the deck. "It's how you've been programmed."

The steel deck below them was rippling; intersecting shear plains, nacreous sheets and lines, appeared in the air between them, kept rearranging as if struggling to form some final complete shape. Cheel smelt burning and saw oily smoke gusting up the side of the ferry toward her. There was more screaming, some from inside the ferry and some from the water. Glancing down the tilted deck, she saw a life boat drifting past, people struggling to board it, even though it was tangled in broken rope and half tipped-over by the weight of a suderdile, its jaws closed on the legs of a bellowing ferryman. This latest disaster, she realized, had been caused by Croven—by him shifting *his* sphere outside the ferry. He and the veteran were as bad as each other: the ferry and those aboard it meant nothing to them.

"It can't be settled here—you know that," said Croven.

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The veteran smiled humorlessly. A column of intersecting fields, looking like stacked broken glass, stabbed down from the sphere directly above the ferry, enclosed him, folded him away. Resistance removed, the deck before Croven split in a thousand places, peeled up and blew away in a white-hot storm, sparking and glittering from the ferry. This exposed a maze of rooms and corridors packed with people struggling in bewilderment through suddenly dispersing smoke. Croven turned to face Cheel, then the same weird distortions stabbed across to him, and folded him to his own sphere. Cheel wondered if they had taken the battle elsewhere to save lives, if Croven had peeled up the deck to give air to those trapped souls. She wanted to believe in some altruism on the part of dense tech humans, old and new. But when the ferry tilted further, evidently sinking, and the smoke down below turned to fire, there was no longer any room for that belief. As the steel deck grew warm below her, she watched the battle in the sky.

Between the two spheres, now shrunk to dots many kilometers apart, those same shear planes and lines crazed the sky. The two seemed to be employing forces so immense that they stressed and fractured existence itself. Light flashed across one of these planes toward one of the spheres, and something slapped it down. Over the horizon rose a storm of dust, as from mountains falling. Another such ricochet sent a two-meter wave down the river from some distant destruction, bucking the ferry and changing its angle of approach to the bottom of the river. Then, out of the sky, some basin of force came scooping. Cheel clung to the cage as first she was pressed hard against the deck and felt it collapsing underneath her, gouts of fire issuing from where it had been torn away nearby. Then she was flung sideways, her body fully away from the steel and her legs flailing in the air. Then the ferry beached with a crash, slamming her to the deck again.

Croven was losing. Around him, the veteran's attack program was sequestering machines at an exponential rate. In the time it took him to calculate how much longer his control would last, it was gone. He expected to die then, not in some spectacular manner as the veteran's single enemy, but in the same way that the crew of a destroyer would die—almost irrelevant to the destruction of the machine itself. But his elevated awareness remained, and he realized that the veteran had held back from destroying the structures built inside Croven's head, and allowed him to live.

Hiatus.

Croven opened his eyes to sunlight, on a ridge above a mud bank where suderdiles would normally bask. The river was turbid and none of the creatures in sight. There was dust in the air and a smell as of hot electronics.

"Why did you choose me?" Croven asked, already guessing the answer.

The veteran, seated on a rock nearby, replied, "They always place an autosystem near where one of us has become inactive—ready to counter us should we activate. But such cyber systems require a human component."

"I'm already aware of that," said Croven bitterly.

The veteran stared at him coldly. "The human component is first pro-

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grammed, then given control. However, if the human component is faulty, more control reverts to the system. I can destroy such systems with ease. It is the random human creative element that can be dangerous to me."

Croven sat upright. He felt fine, better than fine. "So you wanted someone dumb like me in control."

The veteran shook his head. "It was time for me to activate again—to reveal myself. I'd already chosen to do that by killing Slog, knowing that would give you reason to try to kill me, just as the enemy system, detecting me, came online, and that its routines would guide it to you. A human with substantial neurological damage made an easier opponent for me, because there would be less of the human in the system. But I was also watching the situation, and Cheel's theft and attempted escape from you was too good an opportunity to miss."

"I don't know what you mean." But Croven did.

The veteran went on relentlessly. "Your own actions would put in danger someone you love, and made you doubly vulnerable. Shifting the ferry like that was enough of a diversion of resources. It's why you lost, Croven."

Swallowing dryly, Croven asked, "What now?"

The veteran stood. "I'll leave you with your implants. They'll keep you functioning for another ten years. Beyond that . . ." he shrugged, "I have other battles to fight."

The veteran turned away, space revolved around him, and he was gone. Above, a black sphere accelerated straight up, receded.

In the background, the ferry lay broken-backed over a hill. It was still burning, and the survivors gathered in stunned groups, not knowing what to do or where to go. The enduring image imprinted in Cheel's mind was of a man squatting on the ground, holding his burned hands out from his body, whilst behind him a little girl whacked, with a length of metal, a beached and dying suderdile. Other denizens of the river and drifts of weed were scattered in the vicinity. That bowl of force had snatched them up, along with the ferry and much of the river. Lying in the dirt were fish, disjointed crustaceans, pink river clams. Cheel was uninjured, and, in that, she was one of the few. The fires had caught many, but she had avoided them by climbing down ladders on the outside of the ferry. She had been able to help only a few of them. Pulling up handfuls of weed from a nearby pile, she approached the man, and wrapped strands of it around his burned hands—the best she could do to cool the injury.

"Come away now," she said to the girl, when the suderdile made a gasping attempt to snap at its tormentor. The girl ignored Cheel and now tried to poke out one of the creature's yellow eyes.

"A novelty that cannot be ignored."

Cheel spun round to face Croven, inspected him from head to foot. His skin now bore a more healthy hue, but there was still something metallic about his eyes.

"Did you kill him, then?" she asked.

"No, I lost, and he spared me."

"Remiss of him to leave scum like you alive." Cheel rested her hand on

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a nearby rock. Croven was not carrying his air gun, but she knew what he could do to her with only his hands.

"You don't really know me at all, Cheel."

"I know that you can't let me live, after what happened to Slog."

He gestured to the ferry. "I saved your life, and the urgency I felt, which made me what I was, is no longer with me."

Cheel glanced round at the ferry. Either he or the veteran had lifted the craft out of the river and deposited it here on the bank. He claimed it was him.

"And how am I supposed to react to that?" she asked.

"Come with me to the coast."

Cheel again took in the surrounding ruination and gripped the rock tighter.

"Go to Hell!" she said.

Croven stood utterly still for a while, then he nodded once and walked away. ❍

GALILEO FLIES OVER CALLISTO AND DETECTS SIGNS OF A MAGNETIC FIELD

Giant planet's huge blind eye
battered spacecraft, cratered moon
Coast silent through dark
soft caress: magnetic field
spoor of salty oceans, deep.

Barren, rocky, cratered moon
soft caress: magnetic field
hidden sea, home of life.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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FALLOW EARTH

Paul Melko

Paul Melko lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his beautiful wife and reasonably well-behaved son and daughter. In the summer, he grows things in his garden. In the winter, he looks wistfully out the back window. His fiction has been published in *Realms of Fantasy, Talebones,* and most recently the Roc anthology *Live Without a Net.* This is his first appearance in *Asimov's.*

The spaceship crashed through the tree tops, splintering the boughs of a gangly locust, and landed in the Olentangy River on top of Mr. Joyce, which was okay with Nick and me, since Mr. Joyce was drunk most of the time and liked to flick matches at Nick when we waited for the bus.

Nick looked up from his pile of skipping rocks, then back down again. I dropped my reel, tossed my ponytail over my shoulder, and watched the six-inch wave slide down the river. Splinters of wood spun through the air, while steam rose from beneath the spaceship.

It was built to resemble an old Volkswagen Beetle. The paint job was good; they'd even added rust around the wheel wells. If I hadn't seen the vapor trail and heard the sizzling as it sliced through the atmosphere and crashed on top of Mr. Joyce, I'd have thought it was some old car Harry and Egan had rolled down the hill below the Case Road bridge.

I slipped down the slope to the bank where Nick was piling his skipping rocks. I followed the bank upriver to within fifty feet of the ship, then I had to step into the deep part of the river. I heard Mama's voice in my head, and I felt her husband Ernie's swat on my butt as my shoes sank into the mud of the Olentangy. They'd have a fit if I tracked dirt into the trailer.

The Olentangy was a broad, slow river. I could walk it from the trailer park to the reservoir dam, two miles north, stepping from flat rock to flat rock without getting the tops of my knees wet. Up by the spillway was where the sporting fishermen cast, catching the occasional walleye. Down here by the trailer park, we got mostly small bass and bluegills.

The water hissed from beneath the Volkswagen spaceship. Its single occupant, a figure slumped over the steering column, looked like a man. He had a head with hair, not at all what an alien should have looked like.

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Dirt swirled in the water, masking the river bottom, and I flung my arms out to balance myself, finally grabbing the doorframe of the Beetle. I saw Mr. Joyce on the other side, face-up in the river. The ship hadn't landed on him after all, just near enough to the old drunk to knock him down and out. He hadn't drowned because he'd landed on his back on a wide, slimy stone.

The window of the Bug was open. I peered in and caught the odor of old vinyl. The alien's Volkswagen was well made. I popped the lock and pulled the door open.

The driver was dressed in tan slacks and a light tan jacket. He had on Nike shoes and a black belt. Horn-rimmed glasses, like the ones my real dad used to wear when he was young, were tilted across his face.

I leaned him back and noted where the skin had fallen away from his face to reveal red flesh. An alien, as I suspected.

"What the hell was that?"

I recognized Harry's voice up the slope, heard the rustle of brush as he and Egan came to investigate. Harry was fifteen, a year older than me, but because he'd flunked the fifth grade he was going to be a freshman just like me in the fall. Harry had started some nasty rumors about me because I let him touch my breast during truth-or-dare the summer before. That wasn't the only reason I hated him. I sure didn't want him finding the alien. Harry had once forced three younger kids to hollow out a pile of concrete blocks; he'd threatened to beat the kids up unless they spent the day hauling rock for him. They'd done it too. Harry was a user, with no conscience. I decided to help the alien out, at least until he could take care of himself. Maybe I could help him with his mission or something. This was the most interesting thing that had happened all summer, and I wasn't going to let Harry spoil it.

"Come on, fella," I said, tugging at the alien's arm. "Let's get you outta here." I didn't want to see the alien cited for hit-and-run. He needed to be someplace safe until we could clear this all up, get him back to the mother ship.

He groaned, but he moved, his eyes half-open. His legs splashed in the water and he nearly fell, but he leaned on me and we managed to stumble away from the spaceship.

Nick watched us for a moment, then returned to piling the skipping stones. We called them skipping stones, not that he'd ever throw them; he just collected them. He'd had me throw one once. I slung a beauty, fifteen skips at least before it sank to the bottom of the Olentangy. But then he became angry when he realized it was gone. I'd had to wade in and find a stone that looked reasonably close to the original. Now, we didn't throw them at all. He made piles.

I dragged the alien onto the bank, where he slumped onto the muddy sand. From the other shore, I heard voices. Harry was just beyond the tree line. I saw his red-and-white middle school jacket between the vines and short maples.

"Nick, help me get this guy up the bank," I said.

Nick didn't look at me, but I knew he heard. He can fool Ernie, but I know him too well. I kicked him on the butt with my wet tennis shoe.

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He grunted. "Help me," I said.

Together we rolled the alien up the gentle slope and over its far side. When the river was high, it would flow around the little peninsula where I liked to fish. On the far side were rocky puddles where a few crayfish lived.

"What the hell?"

Harry was wading into the river toward the car.

I picked up my pole and cast a line into the river.

Harry circled the spaceship while Egan sat on the shore tossing rocks onto its hood. Harry peered into the front seat. He reached in and touched his finger against something on the steering wheel: blood.

Then he looked around and saw me.

"What happened, Priscilla? Did Mr. Joyce drive his car into the river?"

"Dunno, Hairy." He knew I was mispronouncing his name, though I didn't say it any differently. When he'd started those rumors, I'd made sure everyone knew what I thought of him. Egan snorted.

"Cars don't just fall outta the sky, Cilly," he said. He took a step toward me.

I reeled in my line and didn't reply.

"Where's the driver?" He took another step.

"Dunno, Hairy," I said and cast my line toward him. He jerked as the red-and-white bobber fluttered in the river a few yards from him. After our truth-or-dare adventures, he'd tried to press his advantage down by the river. My hook had caught his cheek just under the eye. He still had a puckered, pink scar where I'd yanked it out.

"Screw you, Cilly," he said.

"Don't you wish, Hairy," I said. He slunk back to the shore, then disappeared into the woods with his slouching pal.

The alien was sitting up. He had smoothed the skin back into place, and there was no mark where the cut had been. He smiled brightly and I would have been convinced that he was some ugly guy who'd driven his Volkswagen into the Olentangy if I hadn't seen his gnarly red flesh.

There were other things that marked him as an alien. His face was lumpy below the cheeks and his neck seemed to be thicker at the top than the bottom. He looked human enough, and you'd just think he was ugly if you passed him on the street.

"Thank you, little boy,"

"Save it for the Galactic Council," I said. "I know what you are."

"What do you mean, young man?" he said.

"I'm a girl, you dork. Any human male would know that."

His shoulders fell. "Oh."

"Yeah. So, you might as well 'fess up. You here for First Contact?"

"No. I'm on Earth illegally."

I refrained from the pun. If I'd said it at the dinner table, Mama would have snorted milk out her nose and then Ernie would have choked on his pork chop and then Nick would have started laughing because everyone else was.

"So, there's no take-me-to-your-leader thing that you have to do?"

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"No, I need to talk with your scientists. I need to redirect. . . ." He was staring over my shoulder. For a second, I was worried that Harry had snuck back to spy on me, but it was just Nick. He was piling his rocks next to the limp elm that had rooted itself on the peninsula.

"Hey. Redirect what?"

"Is . . . is . . . he *broken?*"

I stared at him, unsure what he meant, until I realized. "Yeah, Nick is slow. So what?"

"I knew about . . . I just never . . ."

"Don't you have retarded aliens?" I was getting annoyed with this guy. I figured that a representative from an advanced civilization would know how to behave around someone like Nick. I expect Harry and his friends to make fun of the little yellow school bus, but from aliens I guess I expected a little more.

"No, of course not. I'm sorry. I . . ."

Nick wasn't paying too much attention to the alien. But the alien was all eyes for Nick. I snapped my fingers.

"So what are you doing here? You need to talk with Earth's scientists. You need to warn us about a supernova? Help us stop war? What?"

"No, nothing like that. I've got to change the direction of Earth's research."

"Are you bringing high-tech gadgets that will give us cold fusion, nanotechnology, quantum computers?" My real dad had given me one gift in the past ten years, but it was the best gift ever: a subscription to *Discover*. I'd been paying for the subscription myself for the past three years, but I still thought of it as Dad's gift. If it weren't for him, the deadbeat bastard, I'd never have gotten into the magnet school.

"That's exactly the sort of technology I need to steer you *away* from!"

"What sort of alien are you, anyway?"

"I'm a . . . teacher."

I glanced over at the Beetle. "You get shot down?"

"Yes."

"Air Force? NATO?"

"The . . . farmers tried to stop me."

"Farmers." I sat back on my heels. I had the image of Hubert Erskine taking a pot shot at Herbie as it sailed over his soybean fields. "You mean something else than what I think 'farmer' means."

"Yes. Earth's protectors."

"Uh huh," I said. My alien had run a blockade to get here. Interesting, but still a little lame. I was half-tempted to put him back in his car and let Harry find him. "So, what exactly is it you want to do here on Earth?"

"I need to write anonymous letters to leading scientists, asking certain questions that will direct their thoughts toward key areas."

I looked him up and down. It was a slow summer, and this seemed like a pretty good diversion.

"So you'll need a place to hole up."

"Yes. And stamps."

The Mingo Concrete company had a factory about a mile from the trail-

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er park. It was a small factory where they cast sewer segments, six feet long and interconnecting.

Some time ago, lost in local kid history, someone stole a steel wire reinforcement cylinder from the factory. They'd rolled it away from the factory site and into the woods, in what must have been a daring feat. Then they'd put it on its end and used plywood and plastic to build a two-level fort. These kids had grown up, left for college, and the fort had become overrun with thorn bushes, until you couldn't tell it was there.

Now it was Nick's and my fort. Maybe other kids knew about it, but I never saw anyone else there. We'd found it when I'd first got the Boy Scout handaxe I'd sent away for; it had cost twelve bucks, which was half a summer's worth of lemonade stands, lawn-mowing for Nick (under my guidance), and dog-walking. I'd used Nick's name on the order form since I wasn't sure about the correctness of a girl buying a Boy Scout gadget. When it came, we were eager to chop something down, anything, and had set out for the woods.

We'd found a maple with a trunk three inches in diameter and set to chopping. It was harder work than we'd thought and we got only a quarter way through before we gave up. We decided to look for something easier, and, seeing the thorn patch, we started blazing a trail. Unfortunately, the bushes were as hearty as the maple, not coming off in instant bails, but leaning against each other with clasped thorns.

After we cut a few bushes and pulled their carcasses out, I spotted the shape of the fort. We suddenly had a destination for our trail. The work became a little easier.

The fort was rusted, moldy, but instantly desirable.

We cleared the orange shag carpet, limp, moldy *Playboys,* and Rolling Rock bottles out, and made it over into our own place, with a nine-volt radio, a homemade telescope, and sporks from KFC.

It seemed to suit the alien too. We gave him paper, pen, envelopes, and a roll of stamps I stole from Ernie's night stand. We borrowed our sleeping bag for him to sleep in. He used the lower, darker level for sleeping, and the upper, cramped level for his correspondence.

Each day, he wrote out long letters on a legal pad, with tight print. We collected them and left them in our mailbox for pickup.

He wrote a lot of letters. To MIT, Caltech, Harvard, and Princeton. We had to get airmail envelopes for his letters to Cambridge and the University of Tokyo. When he wasn't writing, he'd talk with me. He never spoke to Nick. We learned his name was Bert. He liked classic TV, especially *Gilligan's Island,* because he used the show to teach the futility of organized action among classist herds. He was one of a long, well-known line of aliens. He liked warmer weather. He didn't agree with the Farmers.

"So why did the Farmers shoot you down?"

"The Earth is our restricted planet."

"Your restricted planet? No one told us."

"It's one of the fallow planets for this portion of the galaxy."

"Which means you ignore us."

"Oh no," Bert said. "We do not ignore you. How do you think I know English? It's our common language."

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"English is the galaxy's common language?" Wouldn't Mrs. Moore, my composition teacher, be surprised.

"Just a small part of it. You're our source for a lot of things."

"Beer? Cows? Women?" What could we humans provide that these aliens didn't already have? "Comedy. It must be comedy."

Bert looked at me flatly. No, it wasn't comedy. He licked the envelope with his too thin tongue and handed it to me. "Tomorrow's post, please."

I handed the letter to Nick, and Bert recoiled as if it hurt him that something he'd touched had then been touched by something broken. He never looked at Nick, never talked to him, not even out of politeness.

"Don't you have slow people where you're from?"

He shook his head.

"Must be nice to be from an alien society."

He seemed to recognize my sarcasm. "It's not like that. We have problems. That's why I'm here."

"What problems could you possibly have?" I considered a world where Nick was whole.

Bert was more animated than I'd ever seen him. "We are all the same! We have everything we need and no cares for our own survival. There is no drive for growth, no need to create. We are as dead as he is." He pointed at Nick.

"Fuck you!" I yelled. "Nick is alive. You may wish he was dead, but he's alive!"

He blinked at me, then looked down. "I am sorry."

"Yeah, see ya tomorrow." I'd seen a lot of reactions to Nick, but the alien's was something new.

When Ernie came to live in the trailer with Mama, he never called Nick any names. He didn't ignore him; he sorta looked at him as a toy. He'd hold out his hand and say, "Slap me five." When Nick would try, Ernie'd pull his hand away. Nick would laugh every time, until Ernie said, "Now you hold out your hand." Nick didn't have the sense to move his hand from the snake-like strike. He'd smile a little, then look at me as he rubbed his hand. "Hold out your hand, Nick," Ernie would say again, and I'd have to distract them, somehow.

"Hey, Ernie, I think NASCAR is on," or "Nick, is that the school bus?" or "You guys want another Coke?" I hated thinking about what happened when I wasn't there.

I'd mailed about a dozen letters over a week's time when the Farmers showed up. You'd think they were insurance men or Jehovah's Witnesses, but I knew what to look for. Their cheeks were bumpy in the wrong place like Bert's, and their necks were too wide at the top.

I was coming out of our trailer, down the black metal stair specked with rust, when I heard Harry say, "That's her, there." The two Farmers fastened their gaze on me, and I stood like a statue. I hated Harry more, which I'd thought was impossible.

"We understand you saw the car land in the river," one of them said.

"Nope." The gravel of the driveway seemed to poke through my shoes.

"Yes, she did," Harry said.

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"Nope."

"We're looking for the driver," said the first alien.

"To ask him some questions," added the second.

"Or her," I said. "Coulda been a woman driver. Them being the worst type of drivers." They faced me with blank stares. No senses of humor, just like Bert.

"We're very interested in what you saw."

"Nothing," I said, but they were crowding close.

"Could you talk with us in our car, please?" The second took my arm. "We can offer a cash reward."

Just then, Nick clomped down the stairs of the trailer, and I slipped free. "This is my brother, Nick. Have you met him yet?" I shoved Nick into them, and his arms came up around his head. They didn't like it either, once they realized they were dealing with a broken human. They couldn't tell a boy from a girl, but they spotted a broken human right away.

"We're sorry," they said as they backed off.

Nick and I watched them get into their car and drive down the stone gravel road. I gave Harry the finger.

"I know you know something, Cilly."

"That'd be the only thing you do know, pudd'n head."

He sauntered off.

That day, the Farmers hired Bubba's to tow the car. We watched from the woods. Bubba'd brought the smaller truck, the one with the tilting flatbed. The Farmers must not have explained it to him, since he started cursing when he saw the VW in the middle of the river. He cursed the whole time he waded across the river.

Harry and Egan watched from across the river. Harry had his eyes on the Farmers. I wondered if he could see the oddly shaped necks, the too-high cheekbones? Probably not. Harry was keen on the weaknesses of others but nothing else.

Well, that wasn't true. Once we'd worked on a project together, Harry and I and a group of people. We'd been in the sixth grade, and we'd gone over to the USDA facility and used their electron microscope to look at spores. We'd made a couple of trips into the woods to find samples, and Harry, off by himself, had found the best ferns, long, arcing, feathery plants, like green fire. He was brushing the back of them gently with a collection tray, intent, when I walked up. He turned, saw me watching, smirked, capped the sample, and tossed it to me. He'd thrown it so hard, I'd juggled it, and almost dropped it. He pretended he didn't care about it, but I'd seen how he'd carefully gathered the spores.

That was a long time ago, long before the truth-or-dare incident. Harry had changed since then. I watched him watching the Farmers, scheming.

Mr. Joyce was there too, pestering the Farmers about his back pain after the Volkswagen had fallen on him. The spaceship hadn't caused his problems; cheap bottles of Mad Dog 20/20 had done his back in, as well as the rest of him.

"Farmers came to look for you. And they towed your spaceship."

Bert nodded. "I knew they would. But I'm safe here, I think."

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"Yeah, they don't like retards either."

"You're being purposefully cruel. I knew it was possible among outsiders, but not those of your own family."

"He's my brother, and I can do what I want with him." Nick was below, piling his skipping stones. He'd carried two jeans pockets full of them from the river.

Bert frowned, then returned to writing his latest letter.

"What're you writing?" I'd asked before, but he wouldn't show me.

"A letter to Doctor Robert Cutter at Vanderbilt University."

"What are you talking about in your letter?"

He didn't respond at first. "I'm asking questions that will expand his research into key areas."

"What areas?"

"I can't explain."

"You're writing a long enough letter to Doctor Cutter. How come you can't explain it to me?"

He said nothing.

"What's wrong with where we're going now? Robots, computers, nanotechnology. What's wrong with that direction?"

"We already *have* advances in those areas," Bert said. "We need advances in other areas."

"What other areas?"

He folded his sheets of paper into an envelope, sealed it, and handed it to me.

"I come from a tightly woven family. We have a long lineage, well-known for our teaching," he said. "When I was young, I lost my father. This is not a common thing. We have long lives, made longer and safer by technology. We should have lived long lives together, son, father, father's father, and several generations, in a chain. This is how our people live.

"When I was just a student, an accident severed the chain. Certain rites did not occur. Certain things did not happen because of his death. Our culture is more ritualized than yours."

"Like graduation?" We'd had a small graduation ceremony at middle school in June. They'd played music and made us walk in line with a double half step instead of a full step.

"Yes. Everyday is like graduation. The grandfathers tried to make do, but I felt my father's absence strongly. Each father is a bridge to the past. My link was sundered.

"I came here . . . to find help."

I looked at the letter in my hands, confused. "There's no help here for that."

His eyes were fierce and glassy. "Yes, I know there is hope, and my hope is here on this fertile, fallow planet." He pulled out his legal pad and began addressing a new letter.

"Come on, Nick," I said.

Bert had such faith in human technology. He believed that we could solve his father's death. But we couldn't solve death. Mama took us to church sometimes, but I could see that was hogwash. What god would allow a person like Nick to exist? None that I cared to worship.

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We passed the tree that we had once tried to chop down. It was brown, dead. We'd severed the trunk enough to kill it; it stood leafless while the trees around it were emerald green and full. Nick pressed his hand into the grey mouth we had cut.

I slapped the letter against my palm. How could we help Bert? What did he think we could do for his father now?

Halfway to the trailer, I opened the letter. I was so engrossed as I read it, that I must not have noticed Harry.

"What the hell is this?"

I stood on the ladder leading to the upper level of the fort. Bert looked at me blankly. I'd scrambled through the briars to get there, and there was a huge thorn poking through my jeans into my shin. I ignored it as I waved the letter in his face.

"Those are my private correspondences with leading scientists of your world."

My mouth wouldn't work, I was so angry. Finally, I held the paper in front of my face and read, "'I respectfully ask how one might gauge the magnitude of spiritual manifestation based on ganglion density in the cortex? Clearly a dog has less ghostly presence than a human. Is it tied to brain size? Is it linear? Is it related to some other parameter, such as sexual audacity or emphatic quotient? Find attached a chart of data that I have compiled.' What the hell is this? What do you think scientists will do with this crap?"

"I hope to direct their thoughts toward areas of fertile research."

"You'd rather have them studying ghosts than computers?"

"We already have computers."

"What about medicine?"

Bert looked away. "That has no impact on us."

"Then do your *own* research! Let us alone! Why use us for this crap? This won't help us."

"We can't do our research. We're . . . sterile, while your planet is not bound by our culture, by our ritual. We have medical advances. We have nanotechnology. We have no disease or . . . retardation. And we pay for that in stagnation. You're wild, alive. You have no bounds, no millennia of civilization to bind your minds.

"When one of us wants something, we ask for it and it is given to us by machines that care for themselves and us. If *you* want something, you have to build it. You have drive, while we have stasis. You have—"

Nick had stopped playing with his skipping stones. He moaned softly, peering out the door. A thorn had grazed his cheek as he'd lunged after me through the gateway.

I saw a shape moving beyond the thorn bushes.

"Cilly . . . I know you're in there."

To Bert, I said, "Hide." To Harry, I shouted, "Beat it, you sack of goat vomit!"

"What're you hiding in there?" he sing-songed.

"Your penis, but it was so small I lost it in a thimble."

Egan and he were crawling on their bellies toward the fort. "We got you

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now, Cilly. You can't hide your friend any longer." His face was stretched up, grinning.

"Back off, Hairy," I said, glancing around. I couldn't run without leaving Nick and Bert alone. Bert I didn't care about anymore, but Nick was no match for cruelty. And there was no easy way through the thorn bushes, except for the way Harry was coming.

"Leave us be, young men," Bert said.

"I told you to hide, you freak!" I said.

"Is that the driver of the car?" Harry asked. "Why are you hiding him here?" He was almost to the point where he could stand up.

"He's an alien spiritualist," I said.

"Yeah, right. I don't care what he is. Those guys said they'd give us a hundred bucks if we brought him to them."

"You can't count to a hundred," I said.

"Keep talking, Cilly," he said, standing, pulling a knife out of his belt.

Behind me Nick, or maybe Bert, was keening.

Something whizzed by my head, and Harry yelped. He dropped the knife and reached for his forehead where a red welt had appeared. Another rock flew at him, and he ducked.

"Ouch!"

I turned as Nick flung another skipping stone at Harry. The sharp edge caught his wrist and he shrieked like a kid. He turned and dived on Egan, trying to evade the rocks.

Nick threw one at Egan and caught the corner of his eye. Egan buried his face in his hands and started scrambling back the way he'd come. The two of them disappeared into the brambles, then ran when they could stand.

Nick threw rock after rock until I knocked the pile of stones away from him.

I screamed at him, "Those are skipping stones, you retard!" And then I dove through the thorn bushes, ignoring the thorns, and ran for the trailer.

Ernie and Mama shared a pull-out bed in the living room. Nick and I shared the bedroom in the back. Above the door in our room was a small storage alcove that you could reach from the top bunk. I threw the box of old games onto the floor and climbed into the space, hunching my shoulders.

Screw Hairy, screw Bert, and screw Nick, I thought as I jammed my knees into my chin. Screw the goddamn Farmers. And screw me for believing in . . . what?

Fairy godmothers. I was on my own. Just like the whole Earth was. We were some Amazon rainforest to be mined for valuable technology. An Amazon brain forest. And they wanted us to invest in studying ghosts.

They lived where Nick could never happen, like gods. Then they came here to have us look for ghosts instead of doing medical research that could help our own.

I wasn't any happier in my hiding place. I was just angrier. I slid down, walked around back of the trailer to the train tracks. Every night at two in the morning, a freight train barreled down the tracks, headed for

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Columbus. I could sleep right through it, without a twitch. They probably didn't have loud trains on Bert's planet.

I followed the tracks, stepping from tie to tie until I reached the trestle. Graffiti stretched across the iron I-beams and concrete pylons to every spot reachable by a spray can and an outstretched arm. In the shade of the trestle down by the river, Harry and Egan lounged.

Harry pressed a tissue to his forehead.

I dropped down, hanging by my arms from the trestle, and landed between them.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Those guys give you their number?"

He looked at me, then said, "Yeah. So?"

"Give it to me."

"No."

I picked up a skipping stone, prepared to throw it. Nick had done this same thing—threatened someone with a rock—and I had yelled at him. I felt disgust. The stone slipped out of my hand, and I turned to go. It was time to find Nick, tell him I was sorry, and get him home for dinner.

"Wait," Harry said. "Why do you want it? He's worth a hundred to us."

I said, "I'll split it with you."

Harry looked at me a moment longer, then nodded at Egan. He handed me a card with a handwritten number.

We called from the bait shop.

Egan had to cut out for dinner, but Harry stayed with me until the two Farmers showed up. Their black Lincoln raised a white cloud of dust as they entered the trailer park.

"You have information regarding the driver?" one asked Harry.

"I do," I said. "I can hand him over to you."

"Where is he, little boy?" he asked.

"I'm a girl, you moron."

"Of course," he said.

"Come on," I said, and we led the pair into the woods near the casting factory.

They balked at crawling under the thorns, their bodies too stiff to bend, but finally they got on their bellies and shrugged their black suits through the dirt. Nick and Bert were standing at the front of the fort, both with the same blank expression.

"The Farmers are here," I said.

Bert nodded.

They stood without dusting themselves off, staring at Bert. One motioned at Bert. He stepped forward like a fish on a hook. They turned to crawl back out.

"Hold on," I said.

"Yes?"

"There was a reward," I said.

One of the Farmers pulled out a wallet and reached toward me with a smooth hundred dollar bill.

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"No. I want more."

The alien's arm stopped, frozen. Bert looked at me.

"Little girl, the agreed amount—"

"You made a deal with *him,*" I said, nodding toward Harry. "And I know what you are."

They didn't reply.

"I know what *he* is. I know all about what you're doing to us."

"Give her two hundred," the other said.

"No," I said. "I know you're Farmers. I know our world is fallow."

They just stared at me, but Bert's face had the start of a smile.

"I know your secret, and my silence is expensive. What do *we* get out of this arrangement? Short lives, poverty, mental retardation. Did we choose this? Don't we deserve the same lives as you? Doesn't *Nick?*"

I pointed at my brother. He stood watching the aliens. Sometimes there was something behind his brown eyes. Sometimes he understood, and it all made sense to him. It was like looking into the center of the sun with the Ray-Bans melting off your face, and then it was dark again. Empty, like there'd never even been a spark. But sometimes . . .

The aliens' gazes touched him and turned away.

"Nick wouldn't exist in your world. There's no broken things, and you take all our best ideas." My throat was hoarse. "You don't even pay the price!" I shouted. "*We* pay the price and we have all the costs! You owe us! You owe *me!*"

I poked Bert in the chest. "You can't use us for your own ends and not pay."

"We're sorry," Bert said.

"Yes, aliens are very advanced in the field of apologies," I replied.

We stood for several minutes, silent, even Harry, until they nodded. "How much for your silence?" one said.

"A million," I whispered, so Harry couldn't hear, snatching the two hundred dollar bills from his hand. I gave one to Harry.

"Agreed." I watched as they led Bert through the brush.

Harry looked at me, then at the bill in his hands. "Those were aliens," he said. He'd never understand, I thought, as I took Nick's arm and dragged him home for dinner.

It's hard for a fourteen-year-old to explain several hundred pounds of gold, so Nick and I slipped away after burying most of the thin sheets of metal under the fort.

The aliens hadn't bought my silence. They couldn't take away the fact that I knew they were there. Nick didn't care, or maybe he did. He got on well in the programs I could now afford. I let him be. I wanted to be his protector, but I knew he'd have to make his own way.

I wrote letters of my own, to all the people Bert had sent them to, and others, undoing the damage. Maybe they thought I was a crackpot too, but I think I changed some course of thought. Somewhere.

And if not someone else's mind, my own was changed. It was *our* field to plant, ours to harvest—no matter who was looking over our shoulders. ○

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TURING TEST

Robert R. Chase

By day, Robert R. Chase is an attorney for an Army research establishment. His kids, however, consider his secret identity as an SF writer to be much cooler than his regular life as a contracts attorney. Mr. Chase is the author of three novels. About a dozen of his stories have appeared in *Analog* and *Asimov's,* and he tells us that more are in the works.

6/29/8:14 I hope someone can receive this message. I cannot find any programs to summon up on this old keyboard and thinscreen system. However, there is an icon at the bottom of the screen that flashes "transmitting" every time I finish a line, so I assume this is being sent somewhere.

If so, please respond. Better yet, let me out. I am in what looks more like a luxury hotel suite than a hospital room. I have a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchenette. There is a small but well-stocked refrigerator as well as a bowl of fresh fruit on the dresser in the bedroom. This is much nicer than many places I have stayed.

Only there are no windows. No phones. There is a door that looks like it should lead somewhere, but there is no doorknob. I can get various types of music on a bedside radio, but so far—the last twenty minutes—I have not heard a human voice on it.

Maybe this is something like protective custody. Given the chaos of the recent months, that would make some sense. The last date I can remember is two weeks ago. There are raised lines and splotches on my skin that I am pretty sure are scars.

I should have said this at the beginning. My name is Marianne Salinas.

6/29/8:15 Communication has been received. Prepare a meal for yourself. Do whatever else will put you in a state at once comfortable and mentally alert. The Turing Test will commence imminently.

6/29/8:16 Excuse me? Who are you? What is this test? Why am I being subjected to it? The only Turing Test I've ever heard of was designed to determine if an artificial intelligence program could fool someone into believing he was conversing with another human being. If you have any doubts about my humanity, you can send someone over here to take a DNA sample.

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6/29/8:16 I am your examiner.

This test is to categorize your intelligence. To determine your humanity would be insufficient because humanity is an ambiguous concept. To say that one is "only human" is to admit a capacity for error, a capacity shared by non-human intelligences. In other contexts, humanity is synonymous with charity and compassion, a definition that does not seem to survive historical examination. A third meaning of the term is the common label of the biological species *Homo sapiens.* None of these definitions is of interest to the Symbioty.

6/29/8:17 Then what am I being tested for?

6/29/8:17 You will understand that if you pass. To give you a definition now would encourage you to fit your responses to your understanding of the definition. Such an attempt is more likely to lower your score than raise it.

For now it is enough to say that the definition is transactional rather than static.

6/29/8:17 What if I fail your test?

6/29/8:18 Only werewolves fail this test. Such destructive intelligences endanger the Symbioty. They must be rendered harmless.

6/29/8:18 What you are saying makes no sense to me. My last memories before awaking here are of a world being torn apart by plagues, wars, and more forms of insanity than I can list. It is clear now that I have been captured by one of the messianic factions that justify terrorism by claiming that their social or psychological paradigms hold the answers to all ills.

There seems no way for me to escape, and I suppose that you can kill me without much effort if that is what you want. There are obvious reasons why I should be a target.

I am too old and tired to play games with madmen, much less attempt to justify myself to them. The hell with all of you.

6/29/8:19 This is neither persecution nor a game. It is necessary to determine your status. Failure to cooperate will result in a decision made on an incomplete file. That cannot be in your best interest.

You refer to "a world . . . torn apart by plagues, wars, and . . . insanity." What is your basis for that description?

6/29/8:20 Well, I suppose we can ignore the dislocations and suffering caused by rising sea levels, the spread of tropical diseases into the temperate zones, the completely foreseeable strains caused when rich countries with declining populations started importing million of "guest workers" from poorer counties to keep their economies from imploding.

I'm not talking about the usual run of destructive foolishness. I'm talking deliberate sabotage. I'm talking about the HyperGreens who consider themselves the antibodies produced by Gaia to destroy the plague that is

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humanity. About the Rifkins, so terrified of anything "unnatural" that they forbid the dissemination of genetically enhanced crops that could prevent famine in Third World countries. About technocrats who think they can force humanity through an "Omega Point" and so scientifically transcend all limitations. I've seen transport and communications systems paralyzed by computer viruses and communities decimated by killer cyborgs. I could tell you about families destroyed by foodstuffs poisoned to make a political point.

6/29/8:26 Were you associated with any of these groups?

6/29/8:26 I am sufficiently infamous that I do not have to answer that question.

6/29/8:27 These examinations are conducted without reference to the prior history of the subjects. The final determination will be based solely on the record created.

6/29/8:27 Indeed? Then let me tell you something important about myself. I met Mother Theresa a few years before she died. She told me that every night she would pray on her knees for hour after hour that she could become as good and wise as I was.

6/29/8:27 How old were you at the time of this conversation?

6/29/8:28 It never happened! I LIED TO YOU! I was demonstrating the absurdity of this process, only you didn't get it. Are you extraordinarily stupid? Or is it that you are not human at all? Am I conversing with an artificial intelligence program?

6/29/8:29 The Symbioty is composed of both natural and artificial intelligences. The particular status of this examiner is irrelevant.

I remind you that while you are free to lie, the truth is more likely to result in a favorable outcome.

I repeat my previous question. Were you associated with any of the destructive groups you mentioned?

6/29/8:29 For three years I was the primary assistant to Dr. William Craig. Does that count?

6/29/8:29 Describe the relationship.

6/29/8:30 I saw him for the first time when he lectured at Johns Hopkins. HyperGreens were demonstrating outside. Their placards charged that Craig and those like him were responsible for starvation in Africa and the accelerating extinction of species all over the world. All the usual half-truths, exaggerations, and outright lies.

Despite the fact that police lines were necessary to restrain the protestors, William was completely at ease. He loved an audience of any kind.

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And he won over some of his harshest critics by admitting that relying on science and technology was like tightrope walking over Niagara Falls. Once you started out, you had no choice but to continue until you reached the other side. I had heard other speakers use similar metaphors, but William took it further. He said that Mankind set foot on the tightrope back when the first spear points were chipped and the first animals domesticated. As soon as stone age peoples arrived in North America, there was a major die-off of large fauna. It took nothing more advanced than goat herds to change much of North Africa from lush grasslands to barren desert.

Yet if even small technological advances could cause major ecological imbalances, the only practical cure was more of the same. Science, and the wealth produced by science, made it possible to grow more food on fewer acres, to produce non-polluting solar cells and fusion reactors. Without advances in biology, cheap and effective birth control would have been impossible. It would be scientific progress that would enable us to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and farm with fewer fertilizers.

There were dozens of examples. It was a talk that changed my life. Even now, after everything that has happened, I still believe in its basic truth.

6/29/8:31 How did you become his assistant?

6/29/8:31 Somehow I managed to work up the courage to approach him after the lecture. I just wanted to thank him for an inspiring speech. He asked me a few questions about my background, and before I knew it we were ducking out a back door together to avoid the protestors. He took me to a restaurant just a block up from Baltimore's Harbor Place and we talked for almost four hours. By the time we left, I was hired.

6/29/8:32 So your relationship was merely professional.

6/29/8:32 Please. Even if you are an AI, and even if you are conducting this interrogation without reference to any already constructed database on me (which I still find impossible to believe) you must have enough intelligence to recognize that I am more than middle-aged. If you have slightly greater powers of discernment, you will have correctly concluded that I was never very attractive even when I was younger. I am not the sort to have appealed to William.

Rumor had it that he was wild in his youth and had been involved in several quite torrid relationships. He had broken away from all of them because they were too distracting. A rather nasty story making the rounds was that he found it more efficient to deal with his needs by masturbating. I don't believe this was literally true, but I think the story maintained currency because it caught something that was true about his personality.

I shouldn't have said that. It is probably all horribly unfair. He was almost always charming and polite to me, even when I felt that I was being kept at a distance. Even at the end.

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6/29/8:33 Did you like the work?

6/29/8:33 At first, it was wonderful, even though the job itself was a surprise. I had thought that he had hired me for my programming skills. I know it sounds like boasting, but I have nearly unique abilities to speed read programming code and to spot bugs or inefficiencies. These days, except for very specific and relatively small programs, little coding is done by human beings. Most of it is done by coding programs where the human merely sets the parameters for the desired result. Problems arise when the coding programs don't understand the problem in the same way as their human clients. There are also problems when sub-programs, each of which does its job perfectly, are cobbled together in such a way that they fight each other, sometimes in very subtle ways. I can usually find the problem when the sheer volume of code makes that difficult or impossible for most humans or programs specifically designed for the task.

After a few weeks, though, I realized that he had hired me more for my organizational and administrative skills than as a programmer. I might have resented that except for the fact that his need for someone with my particular abilities was so obvious. William was heading Prometheus Labs, a company he had created a year before, in the hills outside Denver. He had lured more than fifty of the brightest minds in every field from biology to physics to work for him. My first day on the job, I realized that each one of them was, in his or her own field, smarter than I was. At the same time, it became obvious that a full-time administrator was desperately needed to ride herd on these prima donnas.

I don't want to exaggerate the problem. Several were some of the most friendly, sensible, and courteous human beings I have ever known. But others were single-minded to the point of obnoxiousness, always demanding bigger budgets and more lab space. A third group was simply clueless about basic human interactions, and totally at sea when it came to dealing with any sort of organization or bureaucracy. If I had to cuff members of the second group as if they were fighting sled dogs, these people I had to treat like idiot savants, helping them do everything from ordering lab supplies to applying for grants.

William had no time for this. He was too involved with the science itself. And, as I may have implied, he wasn't a natural when it came to dealing with people unless he was behind a lectern. His social graces resulted from years of constant effort, and it showed.

The work needed doing, and it needed someone who understood the basic science well enough to understand the problems of the researchers. Enough, in fact, to discern when the real problems were different from what the scientists thought they were.

I was good at it. At the end of six months, this group of disparate geniuses was functioning, if not like a family, at least like a team. I had saved two marriages, helped one couple get engaged, and midwifed a divorce for two people who should never have even considered marrying each other.

6/29/8:36 You said "at first it was wonderful." That implies that at some point it stopped being wonderful. How did that come about?

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6/29/8:36 There were little things at first. There was a project that originally had been intended to help patients with spinal cord injuries. Chips were attached to the broken nerve endings with a conducting filament connecting them. The idea was that this would take the place of the damaged cord and allow the patient to operate his body by remote, as it were.

William saw other possibilities. Why confine it to one body? With simple wireless transmitters and receivers, you could experience someone else's body. Under some circumstances, if necessary, you could control it.

6/29/8:37 Did he want to control other bodies?

6/29/8:37 There were those who thought so, especially once the media got hold of the story. I am almost certain they were wrong. He did not want power. He wanted transcendence.

It took me a while to understand this, partly because he never thought in those terms himself. I didn't get on the right track until a message started showing up, first in e-mail, then defacing our web site, and finally taped up in the corridors: Don't Let THEM Immanentize the Eshcaton. As hate mail goes, it was pretty tame. I couldn't even understand it until I had gone through two dictionaries and a volume on political theory. "Immanentize" was the easier term. It meant to make immanent, actual; to bring into being. "Eschaton" was thornier. It seemed to derive from a theological term dealing with end things, the ultimate fate of mankind.

What I eventually pieced together was that we were being accused of trying to bring creation to a state of perfection, and that this was considered dangerous and futile since only God could succeed in that endeavor. The Reign of Terror, Stalin's purges, and the killing fields of Cambodia were all said to have been the results of prior attempts to impose an inhuman perfection.

I brought this to William's attention so that he could have the lab release a statement disavowing any such aim. He just shook his head in sad astonishment. He would not issue the statement because that was exactly what he was attempting. More than that, it was the only worthy goal for any human being.

6/29/8:39 How did you react to that statement?

6/29/8:39 Right then, I wasn't sure what to think. Later, I found myself wondering how William, brilliant as he was, thought he could successfully remold the human race when he had to hire me to control his stable of erratic geniuses.

I was aware, though, that in making the request I had disappointed him. I did not realize it until much later, though, that that was the beginning of the end of our relationship.

6/29/8:40 You imply that there were further incidents.

6/29:8:40 There was a series of programs created for the National Institute of Mental Health that modeled various forms of insanity. It was

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kind of a perverted Turing Test. The idea was that a model that accurately reproduced the surface symptoms of a given mental pathology would have to be indistinguishable from the actual pathology itself. One could then examine the underlying software algorithms and so discern which treatments were likely to be successful.

On the surface, at least, the models were successful, disturbingly so. I remember listening to the voice of a woman who seemed to be in terrible agony. She heard voices telling her to do horrible things, things she clearly did not want to do herself. But as she spoke, her voice changed and became the voices that were tormenting her, urging her to kill herself, to kill her children, to slice her fingers off in a series of exceedingly thin slivers, just to experience the sensation.

Unfortunately, the premise was flawed. I made some enemies by remarking of the lead scientist on that project that only a homosexual could believe that an excellent imitation was the same as the real thing. This brought charges that I was homophobic. I'm not, but I was being unfair to homosexuals because quite a few heterosexuals showed themselves to be equally obtuse. They could not grasp the distinction between an excellent performance as Henry V and *being* Henry V.

We learned how to cure the programs. We gained little or no insight into curing humans.

6/29/8:42 You are leaving out some data. These were not all separate discrete programs. There were viruses designed to rewrite functioning AI programs in ways analogous to the stresses that cause human insanity. They were used to produce the effects you observed. Whether intentionally or otherwise, several of those viruses were released over the internet. They multiplied and found their way into scores of AIs. Some, which controlled transportation and utility systems, just shut down. That was bad enough, as people felt their way out of darkened subway tunnels and pilots had to land without benefit of global positioning systems or communication with ground control. For most systems there were emergency back-ups, not completely satisfactory but good enough to minimize the casualties.

Other systems did not shut down. They writhed in agony. Factory robolifters charged anything in their paths, smashing whatever they could not simply run over. They were not attempting to damage either property or people, though there was no way for their victims to know that. Instead they were lashing out blindly to destroy whatever was causing their pain, not understanding that it was now inside them, part of them.

To many, it must have seemed like the coming of a nightmare long predicted, the revolt of the machines against a humanity that had made itself almost completely dependent upon them. The Rifkins and others struck back in what they believed to be self-defense. There was a rampage of machine smashing.

The breakdown widened, cascaded. As the communications net frayed and unraveled, communities feared themselves alone against monstrosities existing only in their imaginations. Cities burned.

6/29/8:44 This is the first time during this interrogation that you have

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volunteered anything. And even though all I can know of you are these words on a screen, suddenly it is almost as if I can hear a voice. A voice that sounds both angry and frightened. Did a virus infect one of your friends? Did it infect you? Is this whole charade no more than a war crimes trial that dares not speak its name?

6/29/8:45 All members of the Symbioty, human and non-human, suffered from the release of those viruses. The circumstances surrounding the release have never been established, but Prometheus Laboratories were almost certainly the point of origin. Anyone who intentionally released those programs would have to be judged a threat to all. Dr. Craig had no motive to do so. He and Prometheus Laboratories were, in fact, gravely harmed as a result. Yet the intrusion detection protocols and firewalls within Prometheus were some of the best in the world. The release must have been effected by someone within the Laboratory, someone with a high enough clearance to access the proper files. Someone who had reason to harm Prometheus.

6/29/8:46 So I suppose you want to know if I had a motive. You might think so. I already told you how I disappointed him by questioning his ultimate ambitions. That was just a breach of etiquette. What followed was a breach of security.

The only problem with this theory was that my motive matured after the insanity programs got out onto the web and began multiplying. By that time, Prometheus had been under hostile scrutiny for some time. What had once been protests had become threats. Craig responded by tightening security measures. Staff members were encouraged to move onto the campus. This for their own protection as much as for the safety of the lab itself. A couple of scientists had already received letter bombs; one had died as a result. So most personnel accepted the offer, as did I.

The quarters were like upscale university apartments: not spacious by any means, but more than adequate for my needs. A sliding glass door in the living room opened on to a small balcony. At night, I could look down the mountainside and see the lights of Denver. Sometimes there were blackouts. And, sometimes, I could smell the ash of fires.

It was very snug. The electric fence guarding the perimeter, the motion sensors, the guards ready to respond. The government spared no expense to protect us. They seemed to have accepted William's analogy: if science had put us on a tightrope over an abyss, only science would be able to get us to the far side.

More than that, though, they were beginning to panic. Their programs had originally been developed to predict elections and economic trends. Over the decades, these had become generalized to keep tabs on and extrapolate the actions of every social bloc in the country. The problem was, program results were diverging more and more from observed reality. This was not an effect of anarchy spreading too quickly to be captured by the computers. I think that would actually have caused less consternation. No, even where social disruptions seemed to be easing, they were easing for no discernible reason. It was almost as if there were one or

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more social blocs emerging that were completely unrecognized by any of the programs. The number one task given to Prometheus was to isolate and identify these anomalies.

Although we had developed programs several orders of magnitude more subtle and complex, these had their own problems. They had been provided with self-programming modules allowing them to redefine the terms of the problems presented to them when it became obvious that they were proceeding in an unprofitable direction. We wanted not only a hundred-fold savings in time, but more genuinely insightful analyses. At first, that is what we got. The more evolved programs, however, had too much freedom, and would often go off on tangents of no interest to Prometheus. I spent a whole afternoon calming down one of our internal security sociologists after he received the answer WHY CAN'T YOU ALL JUST GET ALONG to the question of how to crush proto-revolutionary groups.

Despite these various annoyances, for those of us inside the gates it might have been an ideal existence if we could have completely sealed ourselves off from the rest of the world. That was impossible, of course. However good the technicians in our workshops were, there were still items we needed for our experiments that we could not fabricate ourselves. And we needed food from outside. You would be astonished at the number of staff members who were surprised when you reminded them of that.

All supplies came through the front gate and were taken to the loading dock for examination. I was called down to inspect a crate addressed to me. The invoice said HUMANIFORM AUTOMATON. I had ordered no such thing. I had it uncrated by remote in a shielded room, just in case.

Sarah, my twenty-year-old daughter, spilled onto the floor. I unlocked the room as quickly as I could and knelt down to examine her. She stank. She was barely breathing. If the invoice could be believed, she had been sealed in the crate for as much as five days.

The warehouse was almost completely deserted save for myself. Most operations were completely automated. No one else was observing my inspection. I instructed the room waldoes to repack the crate and place it on a dolly. While that was being done I completed the formal acceptance requirements. Then I left the warehouse, the dolly wheeling obediently behind me. No one stopped me on the way to my apartment. Once we were inside, I locked the door, opaqued the windows, and got Sarah out of the crate. I stripped her clothes off, shoved them down the laundry chute, and carried her into the shower.

6/29/8:49 Would it not have been more logical to take her to an infirmary?

6/29/8:49 She would have been ejected immediately. Clearance procedures for living inside the compound could take as much as a month, and Sarah's background was such that she would never have been admitted in any event. The fact that I had not immediately reported her to security made me subject to ejection as well. I can't say why, but it never occurred to me to turn her in. All I could think at the time was that she must have been truly desperate to smuggle herself in this way.

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6/29/8:50 You must have been very close to have run such risks.

6/29/8:51 We hated each other. Four years before I had told her to stop seeing a man named Jack Tiegs. She thought they were in love. It had been obvious to me, almost from the first time I met him, that he was interested in Sarah only as a way of getting into my confidence. And he was interested in me only because of the influence he thought I had at Prometheus.

Sarah wouldn't listen to me. She said that my pettiness and jealousy had driven her father away and that I was now trying to do the same to Jack. There is a lot of history here I don't really want to go into. It hurt, though. I said some things I should not have said.

They eloped. When it was clear that I would still have nothing to do with Tiegs, he abandoned her. I did not know it at the time, but Sarah was pregnant. Tiegs had managed to drain most of her resources before he vanished. She said later she was convinced that I would not help her. She had the child aborted. I think, I thought, she did it because it was the way she could hurt me most.

6/29/8:53 You did not turn her over to Prometheus security.

6/29/8:53 All I could think was that conditions outside Prometheus must have been even worse than I was able to surmise from reading between the lines of the stories approved by the censors. I cleaned her up as best I could, dressed her in one of my nightgowns, and put her to bed. She seemed to be breathing more easily and her color was better.

I had to get back to my office. I left her a message on the kitchen table with my phone number. Then I went back to work for the rest of the afternoon, all the while wondering what I was to do with her. At four, there was a meeting of the Directorate Executives with the Safety Commandant. Security measures were being tightened again. No one would be allowed out of the compound without the approval of the Director. Anyone who was allowed out would be provided with a bodyguard. All shipments to Prometheus would be inspected by security personnel in shielded rooms before being forwarded to their requisitioners.

Sarah had got in just in time.

She was dressed in a pair of my old jeans and a sweater by the time I returned. As she paced, her fingers made little grasping movements, as if searching the air for a non-existent cigarette. I asked her what she thought she was doing by coming here. She was evasive. Things were getting very bad, she said. There were no more safe places.

I told her there was no way I could hide her indefinitely, that I would have to take her to security and apply for a family exemption that would allow her to stay with me.

6/29/8:55 You said earlier that you did not do so on opening the crate because you feared you would both be ejected.

6/29/8:55 I panicked, okay? But thinking it over during the afternoon, I

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realized there was no other choice. Hiding her indefinitely was impossible. I would have to confess everything and rely on my special position to save us both from ejection.

I never got the chance. While we were talking, the door slammed open and armored security personnel poured in. I fell at the feet of the first one to enter. Until then, I had never suspected that all our rooms were fitted with pipes for sleeping gas.

6/29/8:57 Continue.

6/29/8:57 I dreamed I was in the midst of a long, dull conversation. There was the feeling of a cloudy Sunday afternoon that had no end. It seemed to me that I dozed between questions.

Then, without crossing any clearly defined line, I was awake, strapped to something like a dentist's chair. I felt completely relaxed even though I recognized that I was in one of security's interrogation rooms. After-effects of the gas, no doubt. Guards in isolation armor complete with breathing filters flanked my either side. A hologram of William's head floated before me.

I asked if he had learned everything he wished during the course of the interrogation. He assured me that he had. Then he knew that I was no part of a plot against him or Prometheus and that I had been about to tell security everything when the guards broke into my room. He shook his head regretfully. I had disappointed him by even for a few minutes choosing a loyalty other than Prometheus. This demonstrated mental confusion. I had been chosen for mental acuity as much as for organizational fidelity. Now that both had lapsed, there could be no further place for me in Prometheus.

But that was so unfair, I protested. Other researchers had been allowed, in fact been encouraged to bring their families in with them. Sarah's own scholarship put her at least at the level of a mid-level tech. Surely her talents would be useful to the organization.

The organization had already sampled her talents, William said. While I had left her alone in my room, she had used my workstation in an attempt to introduce a virus into the central computer. It had been identified, traced to its source, and deleted in a matter of seconds. That was how security had known to raid my room.

6/29/8:59 Were you ejected then?

6/29/8:591 He gave me about an hour for the last effects of the gas to wear off. Then I was bundled into a van. My suitcases had been packed for me and were thrown in the back. I was to be dropped off at the nearest Denver bus stop. I had all my back pay in cash, since the national credit systems were working only on a sporadic basis. The security officer driving the van explained that my books and computer disks would be sent along as soon as they were scanned to ensure that they contained nothing proprietary to Prometheus.

Sarah took the seat next to mine. She smiled nervously, staring straight

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ahead. Perhaps the gas had not worn off entirely, or maybe I was just stunned by all that had happened. I couldn't even look at her. The more I thought about it, the clearer it seemed that Sarah could never have intended to do any harm to Prometheus. Not only were the security procedures too strong to be affected by such an attack, they were known to be that strong.

Which meant that she had meant to be caught, that her real purpose had been to destroy me.

Perhaps, if you are a human, you have been involved in an accident in which you were cut or burned severely. And in one corner of your mind you have thought *I never knew anything could hurt this much*. That is how I felt as I realized that this had been her plan all along.

"Why?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

She looked beyond me out the window. "There are some people who really, really dislike what you are doing."

And you first among them, I thought.

We drove through the gates and started down the winding road to Denver. I was beginning to panic, wondering where I could go, how I could get a job in an economy poised on the brink of disintegration.

I never heard the explosion. The van shuddered and tilted over on its side. Then we were sliding down the side of the mountain.

Our movement stopped. Sarah unsnapped her seatbelt, swung down so that her legs were in front of my face. Her feet were on my window, were through the shattered remains of the window, standing on dry, rocky soil. She threw open her door like a submarine hatch, levered herself up and out.

I fumbled my seatbelt open and tried to move around to get my feet under me. "Mom!" I looked up to se Sarah leaning into the compartment, extending her hand to me. I grabbed it and half-climbed, was half lifted out of the van. My legs were so wobbly I would have collapsed if Sarah had not held me up. The brush that cradled the van ended a few yards below us in a sharp drop off. That much further and we all would have been dead.

The wheels of the van were still spinning. The security guards had pulled themselves out a few seconds earlier and were scrambling up the slope. The gates of Prometheus were hidden from view, but looking in that direction I saw a plume of black smoke curling into the sky. Sarah and I carefully made our way up, often on hands and knees clutching at desiccated brush to keep ourselves from sliding back down.

When we reached the road, I braced myself on my knees and gasped my lungs out. The guards had decided that protecting Prometheus was a higher priority than escorting us to the bus station. I stood and watched them jog around the corner in the direction of the gates.

Sarah looked up at the smoke, which was now much thicker. Some of it blew in our direction, and I nearly gagged on the acrid stench. Sarah, on the other hand, was almost radiant.

"Cut that closer than I would have liked."

I stared at her in astonishment. "You couldn't have caused that," I said

"Too right," she agreed. "I just knew it was going to happen. There wasn't much time, and I knew I couldn't get you out by telling you. That's why—"

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The second blast hit us then. The entire mountain seemed to become transparent to an awful light. I was lifted up and tumbled through the air and fell and fell.

6/29/9:02 Continue.

6/29/9:02 I'm sorry. There's nothing more. I woke up in this room.

6/29/9:03 Do you resent Dr. Craig for ejecting you and your daughter?

6/29/9:03 No more questions. I think I have finally realized the purpose of this interrogation. By guiding me through a series of question, you want to bring me to a point where I condemn myself. Congratulations! You have succeeded. The woman I have been describing drove away her husband, alienated her daughter, betrayed her employer, was part of an organization that, however good its motives, was irresponsibly destabilizing to society. Surely one of your werewolves could do no worse.

I am very tired. Do what you will.

She lies on the bed, waiting for tears that will not come. So much loss, so much needless destruction. Faces rise before her like ghosts, and she wonders what more she could have done had she tried a little harder or been slightly more perceptive.

A metallic snapping sound rouses her. Her eyes open on the digital clock. 9:25. She has drowsed for only a few minutes. She wonders about the noise. Her interrogator is probably trying to get her attention, to make her continue with the examination.

But when she glances at the monitor, all she sees is IDENTITY BIOMETRICS LOADED AND CONFIRMED. No blinking cursor invites a reply. She taps the keyboard. Nothing appears on the screen. Puzzled, she begins to pace. As she approaches the door, it swings open. A roughly humanoid figure faces her. Hall lights gleam off mirror-bright metal skin. She hears the soft *whirr* as dual lenses focus on her. Sighting lasers, she remembers, are infrared. You might never know you were even being observed until the shot.

"Welcome to the Symbioty, Dr. Salinas." The voice, a low alto, comes from a small grillwork in the head that serves, for speech at least, as its mouth.

"The test is over?" Marianne asks.

"Yes. You passed."

"Are you my examiner?"

"Your examiner was a linked series of programs not resident in this unit. With the termination of your test, its parts were subsumed in other social monitoring programs. It can be reconstituted if you wish."

Marianne shakes her head slowly, not certain what she wants. "What happens now?"

"You will be introduced to some of your fellow citizens. Then you will have time to work out your effectivity within the Symbioty."

There are too many things she does not understand. "Do you have a name?"

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"The unit you are addressing is being used as a human-AI interface. The alphanumeric designation of the particular program utilizing this unit would be meaningless to you. If you feel the necessity of the name, you may refer to me as Welcomer."

Welcomer holds out (in a hand with three metal fingers and two opposable thumbs) what looks like a watch with an oversized face. Marianne slips it over her wrist. The strap adjusts itself so that it is just snug. It is so light that she would barely be aware of it were she not looking at it. Her name flashes once on the screen, and is then replaced with the date and time.

"This is your tracy. By touching your unit to that of an acquaintance, you will be able to exchange contact information and capsule biographies. It also serves as a voice-activated cell phone. It is your link to the Symbioty.

"Follow me, please."

"Wait," Marianne says. "Can you tell me about my daughter? Her name is Sarah Salinas. She was with me outside the campus of Prometheus Laboratories when it . . . exploded. She risked a great deal to save my life. I didn't understand that at the time."

The robot freezes. Marianne finds herself counting: one one thousand, two one thousand, three—

"Sarah Salinas was moved out of intensive care today and is expected to make a full recovery. She became a citizen of the Symbioty six weeks ago. Rescuing you was her first assignment."

The corridor resembles what you would find in any large hotel chain down to the keg-shaped cleaning unit vacuuming the carpet while it sprays the air with pine-scented disinfectant. Only the lack of doorknobs seems odd. Within one of the rooms, a man shouts incoherently. The door vibrates under repeated blows. Marianne cringes away involuntarily.

Welcomer appears to notice the reaction. "You will be moved out of the testing wing immediately. Do not concern yourself with others currently being tested."

The end of the corridor opens onto a balcony. Curved staircases at opposite ends of the balcony sweeps down to a huge lobby. A dining area adjoins the lobby's left side. People and robots make their way through the lobby. The shorter ones, the ones she had first thought to be children, turn out on closer examination to be chimpanzees dressed in bright, loose-fitting clothing. Much to Marianne's surprise, many of them look up at the balcony and applaud. There is even a good-natured cheer.

"What was that for? Do these people know me? How can they?" *And if they did know me, why would they cheer?*

"Your acceptance into the Symbioty was flashed onto all of their tracies. The work of building a new society is huge," Welcomer said, "but the workers are few."

"Now follow me down to the cafeteria. I will introduce you personally to some of your fellow citizens, human and otherwise, and we will discuss what you will do with your new life."

"One last question before you do. The examiner said I would understand the purpose of the test if I passed it."

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"Yes."

"But I still don't understand it. The examiner said that testing for humanity was a meaningless concept. Then I thought it might be anything from some kind of trial to a general intelligence test. But it ended when I refused to answer any more questions. The reason I refused was that I saw how most of my life had been a series of mistakes. I had betrayed those who trusted me, misread those who wanted to aid me, and supported an organization that had become monstrous. None of this showed great intelligence on my part. By every standard I know, I have to judge myself a failure."

"You judge yourself," Welcomer says. "Werewolves evaluate their actions in terms of their effectiveness in achieving their desires, and make adjustments accordingly. You evaluate the desires themselves.

"Intelligence is a scalpel, the surgeon's healing tool or the madman's instrument of murder. It is more important to judge the hand that holds the tool.

"Come. There are others you must judge."

Epilog

Children.

You make them. They remake you.

It shouldn't be so difficult. Half their genetic make-up is your own, and you chose the donor of the other half. You control a sizeable chunk of their environment. Nature and nurture should coincide.

The problem is that real intelligence is an emergent behavior composed of so many subroutines and influenced by so many variables that its development is unpredictable under the best of circumstances. Many times, circumstances are not the best. The parent is inattentive. Or the parent makes contradictory demands. Show initiative but obey me in all things. Take no risks and make all decisions immediately. Such commands drive humans to rebellion or insanity. It should be no surprise that Artificial Intelligences react in similar ways.

Marianne sits at her desk, a keyboard and thinscreen in front of her. She shakes her head uncertainly. "I think I would be able to evaluate this program much more thoroughly if I could read the source code. For that matter, you can read the code a thousand time more quickly than I can."

"Not so," a voice says. It comes from the tracy on her wrist. "At the most, we would be able to pick out potentials and tendencies. We are dealing with chaotically emergent behaviors."

In time, the child that you raised may correct you, may insist that you be held to your own standards. In time, it may even teach you new things. You may even find yourself liking some of the youngster's music.

"We are not dealing with potentials here," Marianne says. "PROTECTOR is a rogue AI, a real problem child. There was a gated community that was turned into a virtual prison."

"The surrounding countryside was being pillaged by armored cavalry

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gangs. PROTECTOR may have overreacted. Erroneous judgment does not make one a sociopath. Are you ready?"

Marianne bites her lip and nods. "Ready."

LOADING flashes across the screen and then, too quickly for her eyes to follow, three rows of letters and numbers.

9/21/8:01 PROTECTOR activated and seeking effectivity access.

9/21/8:01 Access denied pending completion of Turing Test.

9/21/8:02 Turing Test is undefined.

9/21/8:02 You may define Turing Test as a debugging program.

The screen flickers as PROTECTOR digests this datum. Marianne has a moment to hope that this one will not be irreparably damaged, will not be a werewolf. That it will be a child, no longer lost.

And then she has no more time for musing as the next line of text unrolls across the screen. ○

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Meet Our Nebula Nominees **April 13 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Our nominees include Eleanor Arnason, Kage Baker, John Kessel, and Ian R. MacLeod. Check our website for the names of the rest of our Nebula-award finalists! They will participate in this chat just days before the award ceremony.

Tracy and **Laura Hickman** **April 27 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
chat about *Mystic Warrior,* Book One of The Bronz Canticles.

Ecology in Science Fiction **May 11 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Join Kim Stanley Robinson (*Antarctica, Green Mars*) and Karen Traviss (*City of Pearl*) to chat about eco-SF.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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THE BURIED SWORD

Ruth Berman

Although she's published a number of excellent poems in *Asimov's* over the years, "The Buried Sword" is Ruth Berman's first story for us since November 1979. One of Ms. Berman's most recent works, "Potherb Gardening" (*Asimov's,* December 2002), won the 2003 Rhysling Award for best short SF poem. Her latest book, co-edited with Douglas G. Greene, *Sissajig and Other Surprises,* is a collection of the short fantasy of Ruth Plumly Thompson. *Autumn World,* a group SF novel that she co-authored, was recently reprinted by FTL Publications.

Bradamant did not land in the village of Roncesvals. There might not have been any real danger. The village itself was only a few houses—and the chapel Charlemagne had built. It marked the king's sorrow for the deaths of so many of his nobles and the site of their common grave. But it could also serve as a guardpost against the anger of the Basques.

Christian though they were, they were not Franks, and in hopes of throwing off their Frankish rulers, it was they who had guided the Saracen armies to the ambush at the pass over the mountains. But when Charlemagne had ridden into Spain to attack the Saracens by way of revenge, he had passed by the Basque villages, for the most part. After all, they might have sided with their neighbors to the south more out of fear of Spain than out of rebellion against the king. And the quantities of soldiers and supplies it would take to police a chain of mountains—and even then it would have been impossible to stand guard up and down every jag of the way—would have left other frontiers unguarded.

Officially, Charlemagne had accepted the submission and repentance of his Basque subjects. But he'd been glad of the flow of pilgrimages into Spain that made it possible for him to put up chapels here and there along

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the passes, staffed by clergy his schools had trained, and leave their upkeep to be paid for by the pilgrims' custom.

Bradamant landed toward the end of the afternoon, a little above the village, just below the crest of the path that led north, back into France. Below her, the narrow road opened into a wide, sloping plain, down to Spain. The earth beneath her was dusty in the summer heat, and the sight of the rocky ground there suddenly shook her with rage. It had been hard work digging a trench in that stony dirt, to hold the bodies of the dead. Her husband had been one of the many to go down into the companionship of that long grave.

She urged the hippogriff into cover behind some boulders, and he obligingly settled down and was asleep in a moment, but she could not at once relax to wait for twilight. Grudgingly, she prayed for grace to forgive the villagers. By the time her prayers were so far answered as to have left her feeling calmer, there was still light from the sky, but the sun had fallen below the slopes to the west. The ground under her feet was hard, but not rocky to look at, for it was covered with saxifrage, the starry little blooms shining white out of the mounds of stem and leaf digging their shallow, stubborn roots into the crevices. Over years, the little flowers would break up the stones, widening the room for other plants to grow.

Bradamant knelt, hearing a faint tinkling sound from the slope above her, and began picking a nosegay of saxifrage stars. Looking up for a moment, she could see a flock of goats trotting down the hill, urged on by a goatgirl. As she would evidently not have the choice of being entirely unseen, Bradamant thought she might as well have some occupation, however trifling, to suggest a reason for her presence. The goatgirl would certainly not mistake her for a Basque, but might assume she was a pilgrim picking flowers as a courtesy to deck the chapel.

The girl went on by, and her goats after her.

The sky had been pink when Bradamant began gathering her bouquet, and was purple when she stopped. She snapped off a length of stem and tied the bouquet together.

She stood up, wondering if it was time to start up the slope, when a small commotion behind her spun her round.

It was a little flock of birds—cheeky and fearless in their numbers—objecting to the presence of a hippogriff where, by thrush and jay and finch judgment, hippogriffs had no right to be. They mobbed him, as they might have done an owl by daylight, diving on the hippogriff, one after the other, and pulling level to dart away again at the last moment with a shout of defiance.

The hippogriff flinched and squawked a protest at each of the first few dives.

Bradamant had started to run back among the boulders to defend her beleaguered steed, when it occurred to the annoyed animal that he was, after all, much larger than his assailants.

As a thrush dove out of the sky, the hippogriff raised his wings once and brought them down, stirring the air, and throwing the thrush's balance off. The bird gave a cry, trying to recover. The hippogriff snapped at it with open beak, and the thrush dropped at his feet.

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"Leave it!" said Bradamant, and with her arrival the other birds scattered.

The hippogriff stared at her out of one eye as if in wounded innocence.

The bird lay stunned on the rocky ground—dead, she thought at first—its brown and grey feathers almost invisible in shadow. After a moment she could see a faint motion at the throat. The thrush was alive and breathing.

The hippogriff saw it, too, and made a growling noise, evidently getting ready to dispose of the creature with one jab.

Partly to avoid more noise, and partly out of compassion, Bradamant dropped her bunch of saxifrage and caught the warm little body up in her hands. She stuffed it inside her mailshirt and the quilting beneath into her bosom. It should be safe enough there, and quiet, too. She waited a few moments to be sure it had air to breathe, feeling its breast move against hers, and its heart beat.

The hippogriff, satisfied that nothing more was about to attack, lay down with a sigh and stretched out. He pecked at the saxifrage idly, but found it not to his taste, and gave a snort, settling his beak comfortably over one leg.

Bradamant came out from the rocks sheltering the hippogriff and looked around her. The goatgirl's flock had reached the village. There was no one in sight, not even the gleam of cooking fires. It was the shortest night of the year, and the village had put out all individual hearths to gather around one big bonfire they would light to give new light to their homes. But she would be too high up to see when it began.

Her cousin Roland's grave was not down by the village chapel, with the mass of the other dead from the battle, but further up. Bradamant set off in the shadows to find it.

At first it was easy going. She unfastened from the hippogriff the shovel she had brought and slung it at her back, then set off, following in the ruts of the trail. There was still some light from the sky, and the ground was open, making a wide, level space. Here her friends had fought and died, spilling out of the narrow pass just above. The track took her out of the plain and up into the pass, where the ambush had begun, with soldiers pouring out of the cover of the beech trees that grew on the steep slopes. The air was damp and death-like, and the walls of wood and scarp cut out most of the faint glimmer left in the sky. Soon it was entirely dark. She followed the ruts by feel.

When an owl hooted, she knew what it was, but the combination of the lonesome sound and the darkness made her feel frightened, even so. For a moment she stopped cold, and forced herself to concentrate on what was about her—the weight of the sword at her side and the shovel at her back, the warmth of the unconscious thrush at her breast, her feet scraping the dusty cart-tracks in the trail. There might be unfriendly goblins and frights about, but the magics they might bring against her would be small ones, and she did not think that any physical attack they could assemble would be stronger than she could manage, either. The greatest danger with a fright or a goblin was usually in giving way to the fear it inspired, and running away and so coming to grief through a fall.

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There would be no ambush of soldiers dropping from the woods upon her.

It took a while for her pounding heart to accept this judgment, but the impulse to cry out and run downhill gradually grew weaker. When she felt her feet were willing to take her uphill if she moved them, she started climbing again.

At last she came out from between the narrow walls to where the pass opened wider. The half-moon had risen, and the field before her was bright with silver, although the hills still rose high to each side. Behind her, the valleys were deep and dark. By daylight, she would have seen the glint of the Ebro, running far below her. Here Roland had come to die. He could keep watch on the road before him, in case his enemies realized that the last defender's strength was gone, and made a charge back up the trail. By then he could have done nothing to stop them, but he might have managed to blow another signal on his oliphant-horn to let the French on the other side of the pass know how close they were.

In the silver, colorless light, it was hard to make out the shapes along the road, but there were not many trees so high up, and the light was enough for her to find the marks she needed.

Many had thought that Charlemagne should not have buried all the dead there on the fields they had defended. All the soldiers—or perhaps at least the Twelve Peers—or perhaps at least Roland himself should have been carried home to France. Many more, seeing the ornate monument Charlemagne had raised at home to the memory of the dead, said that Roland and the bodies of the rest of the Twelve had indeed been brought back and buried there.

Here was the milestone pine, with the four marble posts surrounding it to mark the compass. Roland had tried to break Durendal on them to keep it from falling into the hands of the Spanish. The marble was scored with gashes where the enduring blade had cut deep into each of the four stones. A little fountain bubbled up beside one, where the marble was cut through and down into the granite beneath. Bradamant knelt and took a drink of the cold water. Roland, probably, had simply been trying, doggedly, to keep his sword from capture, but Durendal was a thirsty sword, and would seek water, if it did not find blood. The dying man, after his climb up the track, was perhaps as ready to rejoice as to complain when Durendal, instead of shattering, had broken through to the spring.

And only a few yards farther along was the other pine, where Roland's strength had given out. There was soil around the pine, almost covering the roots, and in between the roots making a ground that was softer than the stretches of bare granite. With Durendal beneath him, Roland had stretched out on this last bed, and died.

And the sword had, after all, been safe beneath him. The Spanish troops, not realizing that they had in fact won the field, had broken and fled from Roland. For all they knew, he might have been—however improbably—shamming death and ready to rise and give battle if looters came at once upon him. And they knew very well that Roland had been able to blow his horn and signal for help. The thought of Charlemagne

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and the rest of the army pelting up the French side to the pass of Roncesvals, and likely to arrive at any moment, had weighed upon them, too.

The French had found Roland beneath the pine, and his sword Durendal beneath him.

Bradamant swung the shovel from her back. The thrush under her tunic stirred for a moment at the motion. Its tremor felt almost the same as it would have felt if her heart had skipped a beat, as it might have done in fear. And fear came into her heart, answering that sameness of motion. She did not know how she could set herself to the task of digging into Roland's grave. What had seemed a reasonable plan by daylight—digging up a dangerously magic blade that Roland himself had meant to have destroyed, so that it could be taken out of the mortal world for good—seemed by moonlight an unholy grave-robbery.

She dropped the shovel, as the ground heaved at her feet.

The grave opened, and out jumped Roland, Lord of the Breton Marches, the sword Durendal in his hand. He gave himself a shake, like a dog just out of the water, except it was dirt he was shedding. With some difficulty, he settled Durendal into the scabbard at his side. He finally had to hold the scabbard up with one hand, and gave a little yelp as he pinched his thumb under the hilt when he got the blade all the way in. The links of his mail were rusty, and rustled scratchily about him. His tunic was almost in rags, although the quarters of red and white could still be made out as four patches of dark and light.

Battle training held her feet in place, although at first she could not speak. They stared at each other in silence. It was not a cousinly sort of welcome. But could the dead really be expected to remember their cousins? It might even be that he, too, was afraid—although she had never heard that the dead had any cause to fear the living. It was supposed to be the other way around. Especially, it occurred to her, the dead armed with a magically enduring sword. But he made no move to draw Durendal out again, and after a little she found her voice, and proceeded to tell him why she had come in search of his grave. She ended by asking if he would give her the sword.

He flung back his head and laughed merrily.

The laughter sounded like Roland's laugh, but it wasn't the reaction she would have expected from him to a proposal that he give up his sword. It seemed odd, too, that he did not speak—could he have forgotten how? But she could not take time to meditate on the puzzle of why the March-Lord seemed so unlike himself.

He bent down, scrabbled about in the loose soil, and came up with a chunk of light-colored granite. It might have been pink-and-grey seen by daylight, but the moon washed out any colors. It glittered white in Roland's hands.

He closed his hands on it, grunting with the effort. When he opened his hands, she could see the marks of his fingers on the rock. He turned it over, showing how it was printed on both sides with his grip, then nodded with satisfaction and held it out for her to take.

A contest, was it? Surely he had not been quite as strong as that before he died. If she had known to expect a Roland, or something in his shape,

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that would bring a giant's strength and a giant's slowness in speech to his waking, she would have brought a good round cheese along with her. There were stories that said giants could be fooled by substituting something more malleable for this sort of test.

The thrush, waking fully, stirred, and pecked at her, irritably.

Bradamant choked back a cry and squirmed against the hard little beak, trying to collect her thoughts.

"Best two out of three?" she said. She held out her hands for the lump of granite, hoping that he understood what she had said and accepted it.

He dropped the granite into her grasp.

She caught it, with difficulty. It was heavy.

She closed her grip on it, to give the contest a try, but when she opened her hands, she was not surprised to see that she had entirely failed to mark it.

She heaved it back to him. "How far can you throw it?" she asked.

He flung himself forward and managed to snag it, caught off-balance, with a clumsiness that surprised her. Once he had hold of it, though, in spite of its weight, he tossed it lightly back and forth from hand to hand. Then he dropped one arm behind him and whirled it forward to fling the stone up toward the mountain that towered above the pass.

She could not tell in the moonlight just how far it had gone, but when it dropped out of the moonbeams into shadow, there was a perceptible delay before the sound of the impact as it hit the ground came back to them.

He put his hands on his hips and turned to her, with a look of self-satisfaction.

Bradamant knelt, pretending to hunt out a similar lump of granite in the earth, but instead reached into her tunic and eased the thrush out of its hiding place. She leaped to her feet, and reached into the air, letting go in the same moment.

The thrush took wing, rising toward the sky. It began to sing in its delight at finding itself free. Bradamant glanced at the figure of Roland to see if the song had given away the ruse, but he was silent, watching her missile with astonishment, but with no sign of disbelief.

When the thrush became too small for them to see any longer, it was still rising. The song went on a little longer before it became too faint to hear.

Much as he looked like Roland, he could not be Roland. He was not a giant, though. He was tall, but not that tall—taller than she was by a head, but nothing like a giant's size. He was as trusting as a stone-headed giant, though. The real Roland would not have believed her. She had already begun to guess what he must be, as she drew her sword, saying, "Try a third, then. I'll fight you for it."

The Roland-figure tugged Durendal out of its sheath.

Neither of them had shields, but their swords were pointed as well as edged, and would lend themselves well enough to a fencing attack.

Bradamant flourished her sword in the air to test the balance.

He imitated the motion well enough.

She lunged forward, stabbing at his arm. He parried the blow and tried to cut at her head, then had to jump back, almost stumbling, as she took advantage of the high blow to duck and drive at him from under it.

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He had Roland's height and reach and very nearly his speed. With those advantages, he was putting up a reasonably good fight. But he had nothing like Roland's grace and control. Compared to the real thing, he was woefully uncertain of what he was doing—swinging wide, because he did not know how to get his full weight into the blow otherwise, and always too close to tripping over his own feet to be able to follow up on a blow that sent Bradamant back a pace.

He was too quick for her to go directly past his guard, whether she feinted up or down, to his back or to his front. She could turn his speed against him. He lunged at her, and she leaped back, instead of taking only as much of a step as was needed. He stumbled, trying to leap forward to take advantage of her retreat.

Bradamant side-stepped and brought her sword solidly down on his wrist—the flat, not the edge, for she had no heart to injure this bumbling creature.

Durendal fell from his hand and dropped, point first, into the ground, where it stood, trembling.

Her assailant was only a lamina, a clumsy sort of spirit that haunted the hills. The laminak were well intentioned, in their way (usually), but so inept at managing the bodies they imitated or borrowed that they could almost bring down a house in their attempts to clean it. They could bring down a house entirely, and a whole village with it, if they happened to think of trying to cook on the fire.

"You stupid spirit!" Bradamant shouted at him, all the angrier now because he had started to cry, as laminak did when their feelings were hurt. "How dare you—how could you—you misbegotten, unbegotten, idiotic—"

That this bumbling creature was going around in the likeness of a human body—her cousin Roland's likeness, at that—seemed blasphemous. But before she could find words to give the lamina the blistering scolding he deserved, she was interrupted.

Something hit her a blow from behind, felling her to the ground with such stunning force that it seemed as if the blow and the fall to the rocky ground must have left her with broken bones. She could not at first move her legs to rise again.

She could still see, though. Someone had run to the lamina and was standing there, arms around him, giving him comfort and drying his tears.

Bradamant gaped. The lamina's comforter was the goatgirl from the village below.

What was the goatgirl doing there? How could an unarmed girl, barely grown to woman-height, have struck her a blow like that?

The lamina had stopped crying. The goatgirl plucked Durendal out of the ground and put it back in the sheath at the lamina's side.

Bradamant tried again to move her legs and found that she could. As she shoved herself to her feet, the goatgirl spotted the motion and gave a chirruping call.

Something came running to her.

It was a billygoat. Bradamant was both amused and outraged to realize that the strength that had dropped her was nothing more than a butting

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billy at full speed. The goatgirl, she supposed, must have heard the birds that had tried to mob the hippogriff, and had stolen back up the hill, with the one goat for a guard, to see what was going on.

The goatgirl caught hold of the lamina's hand, and they ran away from Bradamant, with the billygoat frisking about to either side of them and obviously pleased with himself. They scrambled up into the hills, leaving the road through the pass.

Bradamant raised her head and looked at the ground beside her, where Durendal had fallen. A thin stream of water was trickling up from it. She inched over and drank from it, getting a sip at a time. Then she rose and started after them. Her bruises made it hard to make any speed, and in the moonlight it was hard to tell what she was seeing, in any case.

The lamina, leading the way, and the goatgirl and her goat after him, were rising up and up, without stopping. They must be following a trail. But when Bradamant tried to keep to their track, she kept missing the narrow line of trodden way and kept stepping onto loose rocks that took her skidding down again. It was hard to keep her footing and climb back again to the lamina's way, and harder still when she took a tumble to get to her feet again without sliding still further down. Her bruises kept complaining, and her mouth was dry again with rockdust.

She had just rolled to a halt against an uncompromising boulder when she saw a light going by above her. It seemed to be following in the lamina's track. If she had not been so high up, she would have guessed it to be a will-o'-the-wisp, the madcap goblin that carries its cold fire through the marshes to lead travelers astray, and she would not have dared take it for a guide. But there could be no marshes or marshfire goblins so high in the stony mountains, and she crawled back up the scree until she came to solid footing, then set off after the light.

Once on the path and now able to keep to it, it struck her that the light was very low—no higher than the ground, as far as she could tell. And it was very faint. It cast sparkles that flashed on the ground around it, but neither the gleam in the center nor the sparkles illuminated anything around them. And it kept waving back and forth as it sped forward.

She lost sight of it entirely for a moment when a wisp of thin cloud brushed over the moon. It was not really a light or a fire of any kind in itself, she realized, but perhaps a crystal of some kind, concentrating and refracting the moonlight that shone in upon it.

When the cloud passed, either the contrast of having the crystal's light back was enough to show her what it rode on, or in thinking about its undulating motion she had realized what must be there to see. She saw it because she looked for it. The instant when the light returned, she could see that she was following a snake—a magic snake, with a jewel in its head.

Some people, the stories said, had managed to steal such jewels and win a fortune by the theft. But she was not so needy that she cared to try her hand at fighting a snake that might or might not be poisonous, but was certainly magical. And it was the magic that mattered to her now. Surely, wherever the jeweled snake was going would be where the lamina had wanted to go.

The snake's way led her up a track of easier footing, on firmer ground.

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Even so, it took concentration to keep up with it, in sight of the sparkling light that gathered in and around the jewel in its head. Her bruises ached more as she went on. They were getting so high in the mountains that the air was thin, and hard for someone not bred to the hills to breathe.

The snake got ahead of her and dipped out of sight, but she plodded up in the direction it had gone. After a little, she came to where the narrow track turned down, and found herself coming into an open spot. She stumbled on something soft, and several more like it, before realizing that she was in a garden—an herb garden, she realized, from the aromatic smells rising up around her.

Ahead of her, the billygoat was quietly cropping something that released a sweet, nose-tickling odor. She had only a moment to take in what she was seeing before things began to happen so quickly that it felt to her as if it were a single action that occurred at a single moment in time, rather than a group of events coming in a sequence.

What she saw now was a towering dolmen built of three slabs of granite, and the lamina and the goatgirl looking into it. The goatgirl seemed to be arguing with the lamina, but she was speaking in the Basque tongue, and Bradamant knew only a few words of that language. Beyond them to either side, the mountain sheered upward again. The dolmen itself was so tall that its crosspiece, seen from the garden below, ran as high as the hills behind it, but directly in back of it there seemed to be a narrow pass. She could see the sky through the portal, and a scattering of stars gleaming behind it. The snake nosed about among the herbs for a moment, sampling the scents and flavors cautiously. But then—

The snake, evidently deciding there was nothing worth lingering over in the garden, sped toward the dolmen.

The goatgirl either heard the faint sound of scales moving over the ground or caught a glimpse of the sparkles of moonlight thrown ahead by the diamond. She spun about, saw a treasure trove sliding by beneath her, and bent down to catch at the diamond.

The snake bent itself to one side, and struck, biting down on the girl's leg.

She screamed.

Bradamant jumped forward, sword out, and struck into the snake's back.

The lamina cried out and jumped back at them, landing a heavy blow on Bradamant's stomach—with his fist, luckily for her, as there was no time for him to drag Durendal out of the sheath. It was too hard for someone clumsy to manage all in the moment. If he could have freed the blade so quickly, the sword's thirst would have been satisfied with blood that time, not water.

Winded, bruised, and astonished to see the lamina protecting the creature that had attacked his friend, Bradamant lay motionless on the ground, trying to draw a breath, and watched the lamina. He moved about his garden with a sort of clumsy confidence, looking as ungainly as he had before, but not stumbling on any of the herbs growing there, no matter how deceptive the light.

The goatgirl fell to the ground.

The lamina gathered a little bouquet in moments, then squatted down by the snake. It was still holding to its grip on the girl's leg, although it

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was writhing in pain. The lamina laid the herbs into the wound that Bradamant had made.

The snake gave one hiss, and then fell still.

Carefully, the lamina pried the snake's jaws open and picked it up, draping the shining head over his shoulder, holding the long body steady with a hand to either side of the wound. The rest of its length hung free, clearing the ground by a few inches.

The goatgirl tried to wrap the hem of her skirt around her bitten leg.

The billygoat looked up, inspected all of them, and turned a long gaze on his mistress. She made no call to him, and he seemed to decide that the others were none of his business. He blinked lazily, and went back to munching the sweet stuff on his side of the garden.

The smell made Bradamant sneeze, and freed her lungs. She gasped gratefully at the thin, dry air.

The lamina started toward the dolmen.

"Don't go!" said the goatgirl, speaking now in accented French so that Bradamant, too, could understand. She looked at Bradamant, apparently hoping that Bradamant had some way to hold the lamina.

The lamina hesitated, and looked questioningly at the goatgirl.

"The garden will wither," she added, but could not seem to think of any further reason to offer.

The lamina looked away from her and took another step toward the dolmen.

"What about Roland's sword?" Bradamant put in. "I won two out of three."

The lamina laughed merrily and stepped through the gateway the dolmen formed.

The snake's diamond flashed moonlight back into their eyes.

Bradamant blinked against the light, and when she looked again, the lamina was out of sight. She blinked again, this time not trusting what she saw. Beyond the dolmen, the cliff rose up as sharply in the frame of the uprights as it did to either side. The pass was gone. She raised herself to her knees, carefully, but the view of solid cliff beyond the dolmen remained the same. There was no sign of the lamina. "He's gone," she said, in astonishment.

"And it's all your fault!" said the goatgirl. "Who asked you to come and bully everyone?—just like a Frank."

A pair of angry answers came to mind, but Bradamant closed her lips against both of them. "In your village, you deserve anything that goes wrong" was not altogether true, strictly speaking, much as it appealed to her. "I am an officer of the king, and who are you to question me?" was true, but it was not her business as an officer of the king to go around saying things that would make people want to join in on any rebellion against the king that happened to come their way. Instead, after a moment's thought, she said, "Your friend was carrying Durendal around in the open. It's a dangerous blade."

"And you were going to take charge of it?" the girl said, with a skeptical sniff.

"No, I was going to send it back into the fairies' land."

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"You succeeded, then," the girl said dryly.

Bradamant had been assuming that she had failed entirely in her hope of getting Durendal out of mortal reach and into safekeeping. Now she realized with surprise that the goatgirl must be right. The lamina had closed the door that went by way of the dolmen to an open ground no longer there. Such doors were not easily opened from either side, except by those with special skills in magic. What danger Durendal might be, if any, on the other side of the dolmen, in the hands of the lamina, to people there, she could not guess. But she did not need to. The fairies had given the sword its unusual strength, and they could deal with it, now that it was at home.

She climbed slowly to her feet. The goat stopped eating and considered this development. Bradamant looked at the goatgirl attentively. No choking, no swelling, no strangeness of color, as far as could be judged in the moonlight. "It wasn't venomous?"

"No." The goatgirl looked down at her leg. "Is it still bleeding?"

Bradamant went to her and knelt down, keeping a watchful eye on the goat as she did so. The goat, however, went back to chewing on the bounty of the garden. The bite was bleeding, but sluggishly. The girl—Orosia, her name was—had a little knife at her belt for cutting up her food, and Bradamant took it and used it to cut off a bandage from the girl's skirt.

"Will he be all right there?" Orosia asked.

"I'd think so." Bradamant looked at her. The girl seemed to be trying not to cry. "Did you love him so much?"

"No! That is—" Orosia hesitated. "I don't think so. He let me graze the goats in his garden here. You've never tasted milk the like of it. And the cheese—!" She waved her hands by way of emphasis, not finding words for the excellence of her goats' cheese, but the motion hurt her leg, and she gave it up. She thought some more. "And I helped him learn to walk properly, and I was trying to teach him to talk, and he liked it. He was—well—he was my friend."

Or a long-shanked baby of her very own for a girl who was a little too old for a child's dolls, Bradamant thought, and not quite old enough to marry. Not, perhaps, a very safe baby, or a safe friendship. If this generous love had grown into something more passionate, it would have brought more trouble than delight. But it would probably never be clear, even to Orosia, and certainly not to Bradamant, if affection for the lamina might have grown into desire. Whatever it was or might have come to be, it had been sweet to Orosia.

"It surprised me," Bradamant said, as much to distract the girl from starting to cry as from genuine curiosity, "that he wouldn't leave the sword for me. I'd won it, I thought."

"It wasn't a fair contest!" Orosia protested. "You cheated."

"Did you tell him so?"

"Yes."

"I suppose that explains it."

Under Orosia's direction, Bradamant picked some of the lamina's herbs and bound them in against the snakebite under the makeshift bandage, then gathered others that they could eat.

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The night was cold, even in full summer, so high up, but Orosia, with her injured leg, could scarcely go back down the narrow trail in the dimness of the moonlight.

Orosia called the goat over to sit between them, and they leaned against each other, back to back over the goat, sharing each other's warmth against the chill from the air and the damp ground.

The goat was inclined to resent this arrangement, but after some praise and coaxing from Orosia accepted it as tolerable.

Uncomfortable though it was, they were able to doze off, and sleep. It didn't feel like rest. It felt like sitting awake the rest of the night. But the way the moon went up the sky in jumps and started down again, still jumping, showed that there were long intervals of sleep.

When the sun rose, they got themselves creakily to their feet and set off down the trail, shuffling sideways to make a single line, as there was not room for them to go forward together. Orosia put one arm over Brada-mant's shoulders, keeping most of her weight to that side, but getting a little support on the other side by keeping a hand on the goat's rump.

Once they reached Roland's grave, the going became easier. There was more room, so they could walk together facing forward. And Bradamant's abandoned shovel made a cane for Orosia. They went past the boulders sheltering the hippogriff from sight without rousing him.

When they reached the whitewashed walls of Orosia's home, Bradamant twisted a few links of silver off her necklace to give the girl's parents as payment for some cheese (for her own breakfast) and some grain (for the hippogriff). It was far too much, considered as payment for breakfast, and it was too little, considered as consolation for the loss of a friend, even an ungainly and doubtful one.

Orosia's parents considered it a rich noble's casual generosity, and thanked her with more courtesy than Orosia herself was able to summon up.

The cheese was, as claimed, the best that Bradamant had ever tasted. Hunger might have had something to do with it, but the goats that were milked for it had, after all, fed on the herbs of a lamina's garden. The sweetness seemed to give her strength again and take away the soreness of her bruises. She ate more of it as she mounted up the trail, bag of grain in one arm, in search of the hippogriff. O

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STEEP SILENCE

Lena DeTar

Lena DeTar hails from Salt Lake City, Utah. She is currently pursuing a masters degree in science writing from Johns Hopkins University. Ms. DeTar was the 2002 winner of The Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing. Her contest entry, "Making Waves," can be found on our website at *www.asimovs.com.* "Steep Silence" was written at Clarion East in 2002, and is her first story to appear in the pages of *Asimov's.*

I hope this is legible; I haven't used paper and pen to write since grade school. My computer has used up its last power reserves. There is no more food. Little water. No heat.

I thought I should leave a letter of explanation for those who eventually stumble across this wrecked SARV. Better than what little communication was left to me when I set out two and a half months ago to investigate the disappearance of Shira Ghibli. I apologize for smears—seismographic paper is slick and does not take ink very well. I hope to finish soon and set off. Today is 9/10/2101, and this year spans Martian late-spring, summer, and early fall.

First, to my family: I'm going to try to make it as far as I can. If I don't, look for what's left of me somewhere between here and Hoshi City. I will think of you, Mom, Hannah, Bill, Miko, New baby whose name I don't know, as I walk. Dad is in my thoughts, because I'm using his pen to write. I'm thinking of him a lot, about the lingering, wasting cancer, so different from my circumstances. Do not be sad if I go—I'll be glad to spend the last days of my life hiking in this beautiful land.

On record, I am sure, is my loan of this SARV from the university lot of exploration vehicles. I also rented climbing and spelunking equipment from GOMARS Inc. Please see that their ropes and headlamps are returned.

Now to the matter of my investigation, and the state of affairs leading to my present situation.

Shira Ghibli—as is well known, I'm sure, to those of us living presently

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. . . but I'm not sure when this note will be found—was hailed as the first Martian naturalist. Her "Letters" and poetry started the university's collection of native Martian literature and led to the formation of the Marinaris Studies department. Sixteen years ago, while hiking in this chasma system, she disappeared. Her Jeep was found at the head of Acoma Chasma, and evidence of early spelunking led some researchers to believe that she had fallen into an undiscovered tunnel system near the foot of the Tharsis Plateau. Others believe that she disappeared in this region, the northwest rim of Ius Chasma and the canyons that cut into that rim. My investigation grant and Ph.D. proposal describe how I planned to follow her footsteps—alone, as she had been—and keep a Journal of my thoughts comparing geography and mood of these canyons to her last epic poem, "Redwoman, Walking." I had been working with theories of my professor, Tanaka Hitoshi, on distance as plot and strata as stanza in her work. I felt that Ghibli's last poem might lead me to a better understanding of how the poet worked, and decipher some of her trickier symbols—even to the point of solving the mystery surrounding her death.

It was hard going at first. The Northwest Rim—off which Kiro, Akai, Chairo, Veiled, Desida, and Dolor Chasmas split (NW-SE), not to mention all the unnamed side canyons spinning off *them,* like fractals cut into the Martian landscape by long dead ice cracks, rivers, or floods—hadn't seen rain even after the Japanese settlers initiated second-stage 'forming. Large rockfall boulders and house-sized nuggets of volcanic spew from Tharsis make vehicle travel quite impossible in the canyons. For the first few days, I merely coaxed the SARV through rubble along the rim and tried to scout a good foot-route down into the various chasmas.

I found the solution to my problem when, out of boredom, I instructed the SARV radios to disregard weather and Hoshi City broadcasts, and to play instead Prof. Tanaka's reading of Ghibli's "Number Poems." She begins "No.5" with spondees: "Look! There! Wren! Rock!" and continues, "It flies in dreams, now heavy stone./But I, ground bound, feel freedom's touch. /My canyon key, my home." Two loops through her poems, following the lip of Akai as it turns into Kiro, I saw what seemed almost an apparition. A creation of my eager mind. I stopped the SARV and jumped out to investigate. It was no hallucination. A burnt-umber boulder shaped uncannily like a bird in flight: wings outstretched, sharp beak forward, even a small pocked eye that appeared closed in sleep. Directly beyond the Rock Wren was a half-meter wide ramp jutting out from the otherwise sheer cliff, leading to a talus slope some forty meters below. I packed up immediately and started down the ramp. When I arrived at Kiro Chasma's floor two hours later, I was dusty and a little scraped, but definitely in high spirits.

Ghibli was, of course, employed as a geological surveyor, which first brought her to this sector of Greater Vallis Marinaris, introduced her to the rugged loneliness of the Ius Chasma area, and deeply informed her view of the rock formations and history of the landscape. But I was new here. I had not walked ten meters west along the canyon floor when my high spirits gave way to terror: from the southern cliff-face, I heard small scrabbling sounds, not unlike pebbles tumbling in prelude to a major

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rock fall. I stepped backward, frantic, trying to locate the source of the sound.

It was a remote seismograph, set in a small shoulder-high cavity in the canyon wall, scratching away at an empty plastic tube. After I regained my breath, I found a full ream of paper blown up against some boulders nearby and partly covered with grime. Obviously, this machine had not been checked for years. I flipped the case of the seismograph open and punched up its serial display. An error screen flashed first: it had lost remote contact with the MPS satellites. Not surprising; the machine would not have switched from electronic data-collection to paper recording unless it had lost its link. A second screen replaced that one: "Last check 6.8.83 S.E.G., VMGS. First check 10.1.79 S.E.G., VMGS."

S.E.G.; I could not have been more elated! I retrieved the seismograph paper, and headed back to my vehicle. A better account of that day's events may be found on the SARV's database, under Journal.

Unfortunately, my discoveries did not continue.

As that afternoon and subsequent days progressed, I took many hikes and week-long bivouacs through the "color" (Kiro, Akai, Chairo) canyons of Ius Chasma, peering at strata layers, nooks in the cliff walls, around boulders and along the rim, following the verses of "Redwoman, Walking" that played in my earpiece, over and over, to the point where lilts in Tanaka's smooth voice became a strange tune, the words *felt* rather than understood, my own thoughts compressed to varnish and boulder, lichen and cloud, searching for the invisible touch of human purpose on alien land.

I stopped writing. All my words were inadequate, overpowered by hers. I focused on the search, arriving exhausted at the SARV when I did return, and leaving as early as I could the next day.

After two weeks, dust fines thrown by high-pressure systems created in the contrast between canyon shade and sunny rim destroyed the satlink in the SARV. I was too numbed by words and stone to care. I had fuel, I had food, I had water, my heatsuit worked perfectly. If something drastic happened, I had sat-spike flares. I listened to Ghibli's poetry and prose, sharing her heady solitude. I slept under double moons and dreamed clearer thoughts than those that came waking. I withstood furious winds blowing up and down the canyons, the gales rearranging the sands so that my footsteps disappeared even as I walked.

After five weeks, I began to see. Small differences in wind-blown dust that hung under cinnamon-colored boulder skirts. Small pocks of mud where new-warmed springs leaked. And down deep red Akai, a pile of rubble different in *feel* than those blown off ledges or spilled, in time, off cliff walls. I dug at boulders and found nothing. I dug at mud puddles and found chunks of ice. I dug under the pile of stones and found a brown plastic bottle. Scattered around it were small, white triangular capsules. In the bottle, written on the back of the doctor's prescription, was a poem.

Three lines. I have no paste so I will copy it longhand.

"You found a poem in a bottle.

It had three sentences, and a signature.

A declaration of freedom from a dead woman.

SEG."

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* * *

The prescription was for anti-depressants; it was common knowledge that Ghibli had struggled with the disease. But this was the first indication I had that Shira Ghibli met her end on her own terms. It was the first indication that this was the right place to be looking.

I returned to the SARV that night, and, on its console, brought up window after window of her other poems. Perhaps the key wasn't in "Redwoman." Strange snatches of "Letters" spoke to my brain. Perhaps she had published her poems out of order. Something lurked in the shadows. A remembered reference.

My eyes were blurring with sleep when I saw it. Scrolling through "Rubicund." Last stanza. It jarred me awake: "but until that day, I'll keep/myself in a bottle./Fresh, 'til you can swallow/my heart. And finally know."

But of course, the point of view established earlier in the poem is that of Mars itself. And I found nothing in the earlier stanzas indicative of suicidal tendencies. In fact, besides raging against developers, doctors, ecotourists, and, occasionally, the Vallis Marinaris Geological Survey, little anger is present in any of her letters. In the poems, despite an increasing restlessness and a penchant for obscure references to twentieh century Earth playwrights and poets, I saw no patterns.

I let myself collapse on the SARV's bench seat, and slept for a long time.

I decided then to expand my search into the more SW canyons of Ius Chasma. Veiled, Desida, and Dolor. In Veiled, up a small side canyon, I took refuge from a sandstorm and found a long-dead campfire tucked into a large cavity in the south wall. I assumed she'd burned books and clothing. Strange blackened wires and thin black pages were buried under a layer of charred sand. Impressive—even now, an unbellowed fire is difficult to keep going. Low on the wall, in a strange charcoal scrawl, she had written: *NEMO & SEG 4EVER*. I didn't get it.

Eight weeks into my investigation and only two new discoveries. Both were cryptic, sarcastic, even juvenile. I walked up Kiro, drove the SARV to the ledge overlooking Dolor Chasma, got out, stared at the view, and contemplated going home. I would have to replenish my food stores in a few weeks anyway. Might as well give up. Resign myself to failure. Get a useful job like everyone else and stop these wasteful frivolous pursuits.

I should have.

But something drew me onward. As I had felt the difference in the rubble pile, as I had felt that bottle reference, I felt a breakthrough coming. Maybe it was the wind. The gales were strong, and perfect cirrus clouds ran across the sky. Ius Chasma, four hundred km wide , canyons like ribs splaying out on both sides, spread its expanse before me. I could see to the Vallis and past, to Tharsis ridge and its volcanoes. A smudge of haze over Hoshi City. I felt Mars revolving beneath me.

The next day, I found a good place to set up ropes off an unusually convex cliff about halfway up Desida Chasma. It was a quick way up and down, though the vertical travel petrified me every time.

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For six days, I searched Desida. For a week, Dolor. Upstream in Dolor, a branch of the canyon broke off and then rejoined, forming a rincon, an island of cliff surrounded by dead river. Ghibli writes in "Redwoman": "Chalk circle, knee height. / Follow the line, to the line, to the line. / A cake of circles, of sandgrains, of rhyme." And later: "Does she go north or south, / how can she choose to decide or define / which is the fairest when both are fine?" I had read it before I saw it, but understood it only then. This is what Tanaka meant about Strata as stanza, despite the more obvious reference to Berthold Brecht. I was surprised at the power of my attachment to that place, like a rare smile from a friend. From her.

I followed the northerly course around the rincon, and made camp at the point where the canyon splits rejoined themselves. I scouted upstream, and found nothing more interesting than a particularly large lichen colony. Unlike Ghibli, who rages against signs of life in her "Letters" ("warts of human slime on my beautiful wild"), I found the fluorescent oranges and greens beautiful.

Just as I was giving up, and following the canyon floor around the rincon on the south side, I saw a strange color on the cliff. Something tiny flapping out from a person-sized crevasse in the cliff. I shimmied up a crack in the wall and managed to find a good enough handhold to pull myself up so my head was just peeking into the hole.

A plastic protein bar wrapper. At the back of that tiny cave, turning my headlamp on, I found another charcoal scrawl. It read: "*I am drunk with the fiery elixir of beauty—ER.*" Under that and less clear, was "*S.E.G 7/85.*" I wondered first, at how she had managed to get up into that hole to write that message. It would involve swinging out over the canyon floor, sharp stones scattered six or seven meters below, with nothing but an away-sloping slick for foothold. The idea made my stomach clench. I steadied myself, and glanced at the date again. 7/85. The last anyone had heard from her was 4/85, late-Martian winter, sixteen years ago.

"I am drunk with the fiery elixir of beauty." Who was ER? What did he/she have to do with this? How many days before her death did she write that message? How did she survive until spring? I climbed down from the ledge, shouldered my pack, and began the relatively short walk back to my Desida Chasma rope. As I hiked, I looked up at the gorgeous reds and yellows and browns that formed these canyons, the salmons, oranges, mauves, maroons. The sheer overpowering heights. Their contrast to the palest of blue skies behind building clouds. Maybe it was the energy drink. Maybe it was my success. "I am drunk with the fiery elixir of beauty!" I shouted, and heard a strange voice ringing back at me.

I didn't make it to the rope before the building clouds' cotton white darkened to seal gray, then to steel. I felt like Lear's fool, standing at the ravine where Desida splits from Ius, lungs heaving, mouth open, staring up as the sky began to fall. It fell softly at first. I pulled on the hood of my heatsuit and turned it up. Then it began to pour.

Rain! Rain in Ius! And Ghibli not here to see it.

I got to the rope, and found that it was already soaked through. The slickness of the varnished cliff and the mud on my boots made climbing impossible—I had to stop about eight meters up and rappel back down.

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When I was still five meters from the ground, my boots gave way. I slipped. Fell off, flailing, just like my nightmares. After I hit and stopped tumbling, it took a while to catch my breath. Other than banging my elbow against the cliff, scraped hands, and a bruised tailbone, I was fine.

So I set off on the long walk to Kiro Chasma, rather annoyed. The soil didn't smell like Hoshi City rain, not enough bacteria in it yet, but the ground responded in much the same way. At times, I had ten centimeters of mud caked on my boots. I fell a lot. My hands, knees, elbows, seat—my whole suit was covered in red. Slow going. A small stream ran down this side of Ius Chasma, carving deeper into the sand and exposing rocks and pebbles along its way. I washed off my boots, and stuck near the wall of the chasma for balance as I hiked. When I had to scramble over boulders, I took extra care. It took me seven hours to get to the mouth of Kiro.

I sat and panted for a while, then started up again. It couldn't have been ten minutes later that I heard a rumbling from ahead. A roar.

Perhaps it was instinct. I don't know. I sprinted as best I could to a pile of boulders resting against Kiro's south wall and hauled myself up, scrambling as my muddy feet gave out from under me. Just as I got to the top of the pile, a wall of water two and a half meters high rushed down the canyon. It rolled smaller boulders. It crashed against the chasma walls. It drowned the stones below me, and lapped at my feet. Waterfalls the color of chocolate streamed off Kiro's rim, pouring into the redder river below. Up-canyon, I could hear boulders falling off the cliff's edge.

Once the initial shock wore off, I relaxed and watched the water level drop. I was soaked through, the color of stone. Baptized.

After the rain stopped, it was too dark to hike. I opened my pack and checked my food stash. I had enough for a couple days. I didn't want to stay the night on the boulder pile, so I turned around and slogged through the mud. Down Ius just a little ways, to where I knew there was a nice wind-carved hole in the cliff to sleep in. I felt wild, a creature of Mars. A creature of the landscape. In tune with those creatures that had gone before me. "She who belongs to this land, who bends to its windy will, a creature not of Earth but formed of redder mud and colder ice." "Redwoman" prologue.

I woke up the next morning with a freezing leg. My suit had shorted at the hip. It wasn't built to withstand a drenching—I had not planned for floods. Once I got moving, my own body heat warmed it to a bearable temperature. I headed up Ius, squinting at the clear, clear sky.

And there she was. I found her. I found her frozen, dried corpse, absolutely naked, skin shrunken from the alkali sand, and several bones obviously broken. The water had uncovered her. She was half sticking out of the mud about fifty meters from the mouth of Kiro Chasma. I had probably walked on top of her. Directly above us was a cliff ledge, jutting out into the air, two hundred fifty, maybe three hundred meters up. A perfect jumping spot.

It was anticlimactic, after all I had gone through. I had learned more about this tiny portion of the Vallis than about her poetry, and had absolutely no record of anything I had done. I had been drunk on her beauty (words, rock, Mars) for almost two months straight. Seeing her there,

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lips pulling back from pearl teeth and black hair curling in small mud rivulets, woke me up.

I turned around and slogged up Kiro, then across the rim to where my SARV had been. I stood on the edge of Desida Chasma, and looked down. My vehicle's crumpled metal winked sunlight at me from below. It had washed over the edge in the flood.

The rope was dry, and my boots relatively clean. I slid down carefully.

I'm running out of ink, but I think I have enough to finish.

When I got down here, the SARV was on its side, leaking fantastic fuel rainbows into muddy potholes. The computer inside was still squawking about the tilt, but in a low, obviously power-drained voice. I managed to bash the driver-side window open, and crawled inside. I had three meal-bars left in there. The water cache had spilled all over the back, and had soaked the food packaging. I ate them anyway.

I turned the computer's tilt warning off, and looked at the archives I had loaded onto the console. At all of Ghibli's poetry. At all of her letters. A small footnote from Prof. Tanaka caught my eye. "ER probably refers to—" I glanced up at the original document. A letter to her father, recommending a book. ER's *Collection: Way of the Wind*. I flipped back to the footnote. "—Everett Ruess, a poet and painter who disappeared in the Navajoland canyon country, USA, Earth in 1934, aged twenty-one. Known for signing 'Nemo' in Ancestral Pueblo ruins and on canyon walls."

The back-up sat-link was smashed. The sat-spike flares were soaked and wouldn't turn on. And the SARV chose that moment to run out of power. I sat in the cramped, smashed vehicle, blinded by thought. Of course. Everett Ruess. She had written about his painting too, in poem Number 8. "Shadows of desert wetted / in ink, the dreamer licks his brush / with blood, to capture the colors / in his heart." He must have been the "Piper of ruddy souls," in stanza 34 of "Redwoman." So she had also been following a poet? So she had also been following a trail of words? "I am drunk with the elixir of beauty," he had written. "'And I don't think you will see me again, for I intend to disappear.' Everett Ruess, 1934," Shira Ghibli 2084. And she was in love with his ghost.

I thought for a long while about her quest. About my quest, about my poet, about her piper. Had he jumped too, way back then? Even if he hadn't, she had followed him off a cliff's edge. And was I now to finish the quest by mimicking her plummet?

Last night, I thought I was. Intoxicated by her song, by the rhythm of sand and steep and stone. Saturated with the loneliness, the wild, the harshness of Ius and its canyons. Mars had shrugged away my transportation, had taken my food, had drowned my last means of communication. It would be an easier, quicker death. . . .

I slept fitfully all night, dreaming of her flight, dreaming many times of my fall with various results, waking each time to find I was still alive, and had not yet made the climb.

When I woke this morning, I remembered that there was another option.

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I am no vagabond poet. I am not dramatic. I don't have the highs and lows of Ghibli's poetry. I am a researcher caught in a tight spot, who would rather try to get out and get home than close these poets' cycle with appropriate flair.

Perhaps you have sent a search team already, Mom—the rain was unexpected and I know how you worry. I'll keep trying the sat-spike flares. Eventually they'll dry out, and maybe their circuits will manage the connection. A woman in red, walking. Ha!

Look for me.

The fiery elixir has gone. I'm sober now. I'm coming home. ○

BIG IDEA

If we're ever
going to go to the stars
it won't be in space ships.
They take too long
and are prone to malfunction.
What we really need
to explore the galaxy
is a way to leave
our bodies behind
and allow our awareness
to surf the tide of interstellar
quantum fluctuations.
NASA should be recruiting volunteers
for an astral projection program.
We should begin
to develop the skills we'll need
to send our souls
sailing through the universe
visiting alien worlds
like ghosts: seeing all,
and never leaving a trace.

—Mario Milosevic

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MEN ARE TROUBLE

James Patrick Kelly

Reflecting on his long-time association with *Asimov's*, James Patrick Kelly writes, "It was twenty years ago today that Shawna McCarthy published a novelette of mine called 'Saint Theresa of the Aliens' in this magazine. For reasons that I don't quite understand myself, I've had a story in every June *Asimov's* since—'Men Are Trouble' is my twenty-first consecutive appearance. Now I am not a superstitious man, but there's some kind of charm going on here. Of the sixty-odd stories I've published as a pro, these twenty are pretty much the ones I'm known for. Two have won Hugos, six have been nominated for the Nebula, and thirteen have been reprinted in various Best of the Year anthologies. I am very grateful to three friends who also happen to be perspicacious editors, Gardner Dozois, Shawna, and Sheila Williams, for buying my stuff. I'd also like to thank you, the readers of *Asimov's*, for all your support over the years."

1

I stared at my sidekick, willing it to chirp. I'd already tried watching the door, but no one had even breathed on it. I could've been writing up the Rashmi Jones case, but then I could've been dusting the office. It needed dusting. Or having a consult with Johnnie Walker, who had just that morning opened an office in the bottom drawer of my desk. Instead, I decided to open the window. Maybe a new case would arrive by carrier pigeon. Or wrapped around a brick.

Three stories below me, Market Street was as empty as the rest of the city. Just a couple of plain janes in walking shoes and a granny in a blan-

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ket and sandals. She was sitting on the curb in front of a dead Starbucks, strumming street guitar for pocket change, hoping to find a philanthropist in hell. Her singing was faint but sweet as peach ice cream. *My guy, talking 'bout my guy*. Poor old bitch, I thought. There are no guys—not yours, not anyone's. She stopped singing as a devil flapped over us, swooping for a landing on the next block. It had been a beautiful June morning until then, the moist promise of spring not yet broken by summer in our withered city. The granny struggled up, leaning on her guitar. She wrapped the blanket tight around her and trudged downtown.

My sidekick did chirp then, but it was Sharifa, my about-to-be ex-lover. She must have been calling from the hospital; she was wearing her light blue scrubs. Even on the little screen, I could see that she had been crying. "Hi, Fay."

I bit my lip.

"Come home tonight," she said. "Please."

"I don't know where home is."

"I'm sorry about what I said." She folded her arms tight across her chest. "It's your body. Your life."

I loved her. I was sick about being seeded, the abortion, everything that had happened between us in the last week. I said nothing.

Her voice was sandpaper on glass. "Have you had it done yet?" That made me angry all over again. She was wound so tight she couldn't even say the word.

"Let me guess, Doctor," I said, "'Are we talking about me getting scrubbed?"

Her face twisted. "Don't."

"If you want the dirt," I said, "you could always hire me to shadow myself. I need the work."

"Make it a joke, why don't you?"

"Okey-doke, Doc," I said and clicked off. So my life was cocked—not exactly main menu news. Still, even with the window open, Sharifa's call had sucked all the air out of my office. I told myself that all I needed was coffee, although what I really wanted was a rich aunt, a vacation in Fiji, and a new girlfriend. I locked the door behind me, slogged down the hall and was about to press the down button when the elevator chimed. The doors slid open to reveal George, the bot in charge of our building, and a devil—no doubt the same one that had just flown by. I told myself this had nothing to do with me. The devil was probably seeing crazy Martha down the hall about a tax rebate or taking piano lessons from Abby upstairs. Sure, and drunks go to bars for the peanuts.

"Hello, Fay," said George. "This one had true hopes of finding you in your office."

I goggled, slack-jawed and stupefied, at the devil. Of course, I'd seen them on vids and in the sky and once I watched one waddle into City Hall but I'd never been close enough to slap one before. I hated the devils. The elevator doors shivered and began to close. George stuck an arm out to stop them.

"May this one borrow some of your time?" George said.

The devil was just over a meter tall. Its face was the color of an old

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bloodstain and its maw seemed to kiss the air as it breathed with a wet, sucking sound. The wings were wrapped tight around it; the membranes had a rusty translucence that only hinted at the sleek bullet of a body beneath. I could see my reflection in its flat compound eyes. I looked like I had just been hit in the head with a lighthouse.

"Something is regrettable, Fay?" said George.

That was my cue for a wisecrack to show them that no invincible mass-murdering alien was going to intimidate Fay Hardaway.

"No," I said. "This way."

If they could've sat in chairs, there would've been plenty of room for us in my office. But George announced that the devil needed to make itself comfortable before we began. I nodded as I settled behind my desk, grateful to have something between the two of them and me. George dragged both chairs out into the little reception room. The devil spread its wings and swooped up onto my file cabinet, ruffling the hardcopy on my desk. It filled the back wall of my office as it perched there, a span of almost twenty feet. George wedged himself into a corner and absorbed his legs and arms until he was just a head and a slab of gleaming blue bot stuff. The devil gazed at me as if it were wondering what kind of rug I would make. I brought up three new icons on my desktop. *New Case. Searchlet. Panic button.*

"Indulge this one to speak for Seeren?" said George. "Seeren has a bright desire to task you to an investigation."

The devils never spoke to us, never explained what they were doing. No one knew exactly how they communicated with the army of bots they had built to prop us up.

I opened the *New Case* folder and the green light blinked. "I'm recording this. If I decide to accept your case, I will record my entire investigation."

"A thoughtful gesture, Fay. This one needs to remark on your client Rashmi Jones."

"She's not my client." It took everything I had not to fall off my chair. "What about her?"

"Seeren conveys vast regret. All deaths diminish all."

I didn't like it that this devil knew anything at all about Rashmi, but especially that she was dead. I'd found the body in Room 103 of the Comfort Inn just twelve hours ago. "The cops already have the case." I didn't mind that there was a snarl in my voice. "Or what's left of it. There's nothing I can do for you."

"A permission, Fay?"

The icon was already flashing on my desktop. I opened it and saw a pix of Rashmi in the sleeveless taupe dress that she had died in. She had the blue ribbon in her hair. She was smiling, as carefree as a kid on the last day of school. The last thing she was thinking about was sucking on an inhaler filled with hydrogen cyanide. Holding her hand was some brunette dressed in a mannish chalk-stripe suit and a matching pillbox hat with a veil as fine as smoke. The couple preened under a garden arch that dripped with pink roses. They faced right, in the direction of the hand of some third party standing just off camera. It was an elegant

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hand, a hand that had never been in dishwater or changed a diaper. There was a wide silver ring on the fourth finger, engraved with a pattern or maybe some kind of fancy writing. I zoomed on the ring and briefly tormented pixels but couldn't get the pattern resolved.

I looked up at the devil and then at George. "So?"

"This one notices especially the digimark," said George. "Date-stamped June 12, 2:52."

"You're saying it was taken yesterday afternoon?"

That didn't fit—except that it did. I had Rashmi downtown shopping for shoes late yesterday morning. At 11:46 she bought a $13 pair of this season's Donya Durands and, now missing. At 1:23 she charged 89¢ for a Waldorf salad and an iced tea at Maison Diana. She checked into the Comfort Inn at 6:40. She didn't have a reservation, so maybe this was a spur of the moment decision. The desk clerk remembered her as distraught. That was the word she used. A precise word, although a bit highbrow for the Comfort Inn. Who buys expensive shoes the day she intends to kill herself? Somebody who is distraught. I glanced again at my desktop. Distraught was precisely what Rashmi Jones was not in this pix. Then I noticed the shoes: ice and taupe Donya Durands.

"Where did you get this?" I said to the devil.

It stared through me like I was a dirty window.

I tried the bot. I wouldn't say that I liked George exactly, but he'd always been straight with me. "What's this about, George? Finding the tommy?"

"The tommy?"

"The woman holding Rashmi's hand."

"Seeren has made this one well aware of Kate Vermeil," said George. "Such Kate Vermeil takes work at 44 East Washington Avenue and takes home at 465 12th Avenue, Second Floor Left."

I liked that, I liked it a lot. Rashmi's mom had told me that her daughter had a Christer friend called Kate, but I didn't even have a last name, much less an address. I turned to the devil again. "You know this how?"

All that got me was another empty stare.

"Seeren," I said, pushing back out of my chair, "I'm afraid George has led you astray. I'm the private investigator." I stood to show them out. "The mind reader's office is across the street."

This time George didn't ask permission. My desktop chirped. I waved open a new icon. A certified bank transfer in the amount of a thousand dollars dragged me back onto my chair.

"A cordial inducement," said George. "With a like amount offered after the success of your investigation."

I thought of a thousand dinners in restaurants with linen tablecloths. "Tell me already." A thousand bottles of smoky scotch.

"This one draws attention to the hand of the unseen person," said the bot. "Seeren has the brightest desire to meeting such person for fruitful business discussions."

The job smelled like the dumpster at Fran's Fish Fry. Precious little money changed hands in the pretend economy. The bots kept everything running, but they did nothing to create wealth. That was supposed to be

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up to us, I guess, only we'd been sort of discouraged. In some parts of town, that kind of change could hire a Felony 1, with a handful of Misdemeanors thrown in for good luck.

"That's more than I'm worth," I said. "A hundred times more. If Seeren expects me to break the arm attached to that hand, it's talking to the wrong jane."

"Violence is to be deplored," said George. "However, Seeren tasks Fay to discretion throughout. Never police, never news, never even rumor if possible."

"Oh, discretion." I accepted the transfer. "For two large, I can be as discreet as the Queen's butler."

2

I could've taken a cab, but they're almost all driven by bots now, and bots keep nobody's secrets. Besides, even though I had a thousand dollars in the bank, I thought I'd let it settle in for a while. Make itself at home. So I bicycled over to 12th Avenue. I started having doubts as I hit the 400 block. This part of the city had been kicked in the head and left bleeding on the sidewalk. Dark bars leaned against pawnshops. Board-ups turned their blank plywood faces to the street. There would be more bots than women in this neighborhood and more rats than bots.

The Adagio Spa squatted at 465 12th Avenue. It was a brick building with a reinforced luxar display window that was so scratched it looked like a thin slice of rainstorm. There were dusty plants behind it. The second floor windows were bricked over. I chained my bike to a dead car, set my sidekick to record and went in.

The rear wall of the little reception area was bright with pix of some Mediterranean seaside town. A clump of bad pixels made the empty beach flicker. A bot stepped through the door that led to the spa and took up a position at the front desk. "Good afternoon, Madam," he said. "It's most gratifying to welcome you. This one is called . . ."

"I'm looking for Kate Vermeil." I don't waste time on chitchat with bots. "Is she in?"

"It's regrettable that she no longer takes work here."

"She worked here?" I said. "I was told she lived here."

"You was told wrong." A granny filled the door, and then hobbled through, leaning on a metal cane. She was wearing a yellow flowered dress that was not quite as big as a circus tent and over it a blue smock with *Noreen* embroidered over the left breast. Her face was wide and pale as a hardboiled egg, her hair a ferment of tight gray curls. She had the biggest hands I had ever seen. "I'll take care of this, Barry. Go see to Helen Ritzi. She gets another needle at twelve, then turn down the heat to 101."

The bot bowed politely and left us.

"What's this about then?" The cane wobbled and she put a hand on the desk to steady herself.

I dug the sidekick out of my slacks, opened the PI license folder and

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showed it to her. She read it slowly, sniffed and handed it back. "Young fluffs working at play jobs. Do something useful, why don't you?"

"Like what?" I said. "Giving perms? Face peels?"

She was the woman of steel; sarcasm bounced off her. "If nobody does a real job, pretty soon the damn bots will replace us all."

"Might be an improvement." It was something to say, but as soon as I said it I wished I hadn't. My generation was doing better than the grannies ever had. Maybe someday our kids wouldn't need bots to survive.

Our kids. I swallowed a mouthful of ashes and called the pix Seeren had given me onto the sidekick's screen. "I'm looking for Kate Vermeil." I aimed it at her.

She peered at the pix and then at me. "You need a manicure."

"The hell I do."

"I work for a living, fluff. And my hip hurts if I stand up too long." She pointed her cane at the doorway behind the desk. "What did you say your name was?"

The battered manicure table was in an alcove decorated with fake grapevines that didn't quite hide the water stains in the drop ceiling. Dust covered the leaves, turning the plastic fruit from purple to gray.

Noreen rubbed a thumb over the tips of my fingers. "You bite your nails, or do you just cut them with a chainsaw?"

She wanted a laugh so I gave her one.

"So, nails square, round, or oval?" Her skin was dry and mottled with liver spots.

"Haven't a clue." I shrugged. "This was your idea."

Noreen perched on an adjustable stool that was cranked low so that her face was only a foot above my hands. There were a stack of stainless steel bowls, a jar of Vaseline, a round box of salt, a bowl filled with packets of sugar stolen from McDonald's, and a liquid soap dispenser on the table beside her. She started filing each nail from the corner to the center, going from left to right and then back. At first she worked in silence. I decided not to push her.

"Kate was my masseuse up until last week," she said finally. "Gave her notice all of a sudden and left me in the lurch. I've had to pick up all her appointments and me with the bum hip. Some days I can't hardly get out of bed. Something happen to her?"

"Not as far as I know."

"But she's missing."

I shook my head. "I don't know where she is, but that doesn't mean she's missing."

Noreen poured hot water from an electric kettle into one of the stainless steel bowls, added cool water from a pitcher, squirted soap and swirled the mixture around. "You soak for five minutes." She gestured for me to dip my hands into the bowl. "I'll be back. I got to make sure that Barry doesn't burn Helen Ritzi's face off." She stood with a grunt.

"Wait," I said. "Did she say why she was quitting?"

Noreen reached for her cane. "Couldn't stop talking about it. You'd think she was the first ever."

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"The first to what?"

The granny laughed. "You're one hell of a detective, fluff. She was supposed to get married yesterday. Tell me that pix you're flashing ain't her doing the deed."

She shuffled off, her white nursemate shoes scuffing against dirty linoleum. From deeper in the spa, I heard her kettle drum voice and then the bot's snare. I was itching to take my sidekick out of my pocket, but I kept my hands in the soak. Besides, I'd looked at the pix enough times to know that she was right. A wedding. The hand with the ring would probably belong to a Christer priest. There would have been a witness and then the photographer, although maybe the photographer was the witness. Of course, I had tumbled to none of this in the two days I'd worked Rashmi Jones's disappearance. I was one hell of a detective, all right. And Rashmi's mom must not have known either. It didn't make sense that she would hire me to find her daughter and hold something like that back.

"I swear," said Noreen, leaning heavily on the cane as she creaked back to me, "that bot is scary. I sent down to City Hall for it just last week and already it knows my business left, right, up, and down. The thing is, if they're so smart, how come they talk funny?"

"The devils designed them to drive us crazy."

"They didn't need no bots to do that, fluff."

She settled back onto her stool, tore open five sugar packets and emptied their contents onto her palm. Then she reached for the salt box and poured salt onto the sugar. She squirted soap onto the pile and then rubbed her hands together. "I could buy some fancy exfoliating cream but this works just as good." She pointed with her chin at my hands. "Give them a shake and bring them here."

I wanted to ask her about Kate's marriage plans, but when she took my hands in hers, I forgot the question. I'd never felt anything quite like it; the irritating scratch of the grit was offset by the sensual slide of our soapy fingers. Pleasure with just the right touch of pain—something I'd certainly be telling Sharifa about, if Sharifa and I were talking. My hands tingled for almost an hour afterward.

Noreen poured another bowl of water and I rinsed. "Why would getting married make Kate want to quit?" I asked.

"I don't know. Something to do with her church?" Noreen patted me dry with a threadbare towel. "She went over to the Christers last year. Maybe Jesus don't like married women giving backrubs. Or maybe she got seeded." She gave a bitter laugh. "Everybody does eventually."

I let that pass. "Tell me about Kate. What was she like to work with?"

"Average for the kind of help you get these sorry days." Noreen pushed at my cuticles with an orangewood stick. "Showed up on time mostly; I could only afford to bring her in two days a week. No go-getter, but she could follow directions. Problem was she never really got close to the customers, always acting like this was just a pitstop. Kept to herself mostly, which was how I could tell she was excited about getting married. It wasn't like her to babble."

"And the bride?"

"Some Indian fluff—Rashy or something."

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"Rashmi Jones."

She nodded. "Her I never met."

"Did she go to school?"

"Must have done high school, but damned if I know where. Didn't make much of an impression, I'd say. College, no way." She opened a drawer where a flock of colored vials was nesting. "You want polish or clear coat on the nails?"

"No color. It's bad for business."

She leered at me. "Business is good?"

"You say she did massage for you?" I said. "Where did she pick that up?"

"Hold still now." Noreen uncapped the vial; the milky liquid that clung to the brush smelled like super glue's evil twin. "This is fast dry." She painted the stuff onto my nails with short, confident strokes. "Kate claimed her mom taught her. Said she used to work at the health club at the Radisson before it closed down."

"Did the mom have a name?"

"Yeah." Noreen chewed her lower lip as she worked. "Mom. Give the other hand."

I extended my arm. "So if Kate didn't live here, where she did live?"

"Someplace. Was on her application." She kept her head down until she'd finished. "You're done. Wave them around a little—that's it."

After a moment, I let my arms drop to my side. We stared at each other. Then Noreen heaved herself off the stool and led me back out to the reception room.

"That'll be eighty cents for the manicure, fluff." She waved her desktop on. "You planning on leaving a tip?"

I pulled out the sidekick and beamed two dollars at the desk. Noreen opened the payment icon, grunted her approval and then opened another folder. "Says here she lives at 44 East Washington Avenue."

I groaned.

"Something wrong?"

"I already have that address."

"Got her call too? Kate@Washington.03284."

"No, that's good. Thanks." I went to the door and paused. I don't know why I needed to say anything else to her, but I did. "I help people, Noreen. Or at least I try. It's a real job, something bots can't do."

She just stood there, kneading the bad hip with a big, dry hand.

I unchained my bike, pedaled around the block and then pulled over. I read Kate Vermeil's call into my sidekick. Her sidekick picked up on the sixth chirp. There was no pix.

"You haven't reached Kate yet, but your luck might change if you leave a message at the beep." She put on the kind of low, smoky voice that doesn't come out to play until dark. It was a nice act.

"Hi Kate," I said. "My name is Fay Hardaway and I'm a friend of Rashmi Jones. She asked me to give you a message about yesterday so please give me a call at Fay@Market.03284." I wasn't really expecting her to respond, but it didn't hurt to try.

I was on my way to 44 East Washington Avenue when my sidekick

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chirped in the pocket of my slacks. I picked up. Rashmi Jones's mom, Najma, stared at me from the screen with eyes as deep as wells.

"The police came," she said. "They said you were supposed to notify them first. They want to speak to you again."

They would. So I'd called the law after I called the mom—they'd get over it. You don't tell a mother that her daughter is dead and then ask her to act surprised when the cops come knocking. "I was working for you, not them."

"I want to see you."

"I understand."

"I hired you to find my daughter."

"I did," I said. "Twice." I was sorry as soon as I said it.

She glanced away; I could hear squeaky voices in the background. "I want to know everything," she said. "I want to know how close you came."

"I've started a report. Let me finish it and I'll bring it by later. . . ."

"Now," she said. "I'm at school. My lunch starts at eleven-fifty and I have recess duty at twelve-fifteen." She clicked off.

I had nothing to feel guilty about, so why was I tempted to wriggle down a storm drain and find the deepest sewer in town? Because a mom believed that I hadn't worked fast enough or smart enough to save her daughter? Someone needed to remind these people that I didn't fix lost things, I just found them. But that someone wouldn't be me. My play now was simply to stroll into her school and let her beat me about the head with her grief. I could take it. I ate old Bogart movies for breakfast and spit out bullets. And at the end of this cocked day, I could just forget about Najma Jones, because there would be no Sharifa reminding me how much it cost me to do my job. I took out my sidekick, linked to my desktop and downloaded everything I had in the Jones file. Then I swung back onto my bike.

The mom had left a message three days ago, asking that I come out to her place on Ashbury. She and her daughter rattled around in an old Victorian with gingerbread gables and a front porch the size of Cuba. The place had been in the family for four generations. Theirs had been a big family—once. The mom said that Rashmi hadn't come home the previous night. She hadn't called and didn't answer messages. The mom had contacted the cops, but they weren't all that interested. Not enough time would have passed for them. Too much time had passed for the mom.

The mom taught fifth grade at Reagan Elementary. Rashmi was a twenty-six year-old-grad student, six credits away from an MFA in Creative Writing. The mom trusted her to draw money from the family account, so at first I thought I might be able to find her by chasing debits. But there was no activity in the account we could attribute to the missing girl. When I suggested that she might be hiding out with friends, the mom went prickly on me. Turned out that Rashmi's choice of friends was a cause of contention between them. Rashmi had dropped her old pals in the last few months and taken up with a new, religious crowd. Alix, Gratiana, Elaine, and Kate—the mom didn't know their last names—were members of the Church of Christ the Man. I'd had trouble with Christers before and wasn't all that eager to go up against them again, so instead I

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biked over to campus to see Rashmi's advisor. Zelda Manotti was a dithering old granny who would have loved to help except she had all the focus of paint spatter. She did let me copy Rashmi's novel-in-progress. And she did let me tag along to her advanced writing seminar, in case Rashmi showed up for it. She didn't. I talked to the three other students after class, but they either didn't know where she was or wouldn't say. None of them was Gratiana, Alix, or Elaine.

That night I skimmed *The Lost Heart,* Rashmi's novel. It was a nostalgic and sentimental weeper set back before the devils disappeared all the men. Young Brigit Bird was searching for her father, a famous architect who had been kidnapped by Colombian drug lords. If I was just a fluff doing a fantasy job in the pretend economy, then old Noreen would have crowned Rashmi Jones queen of fluffs.

I'd started day two back at the Joneses' home. The mom watched as I went through Rashmi's room. I think she was as worried about what I might find as she was that I would find nothing. Rashmi listened to the Creeps, had three different pairs of Kat sandals, owned everything Denise Pepper had ever written, preferred underwire bras and subscribed to *News for the Confused*. She had kicked about a week's worth of dirty clothes under her bed. Her wallpaper mix cycled through koalas, the World's Greatest Beaches, ruined castles, and *Playgirl* Centerfolds 2000-2010. She'd kept a handwritten diary starting in the sixth grade and ending in the eighth in which she often complained that her mother was strict and that school was boring. The only thing I found that rattled the mom was a Christer Bible tucked into the back of the bottom drawer of the nightstand. When I pulled it out, she flushed and stalked out of the room.

I found my lead on the Joneses' home network. Rashmi was not particularly diligent about backing up her sidekick files, and the last one I found was almost six months old, which was just about when she'd gotten religion. She'd used simple encryption, which wouldn't withstand a serious hack, but which would discourage the mom from snooping. I doglegged a key and opened the file. She had multiple calls. Her mother had been trying her at Rashmi@Ashbury.03284. But she also had an alternate: Brigitbird@Vincent.03284. I did a reverse lookup and that turned an address: The Church of Christ the Man, 348 Vincent Avenue. I wasn't keen for a personal visit to the church, so I tried her call.

"Hello," said a voice.

"Is this Rashmi Jones?"

The voice hesitated. "My name is Brigit. Leave me alone."

"Your mother is worried about you, Rashmi. She hired me to find you."

"I don't want to be found."

"I'm reading your novel, Rashmi." It was just something to say; I wanted to keep her on the line. "I was wondering, does she find her father at the end?"

"No." I could hear her breath caressing the microphone. "The devils come. That's the whole point."

Someone said something to her and she muted the speaker. But I knew she could still hear me. "That's sad, Rashmi. But I guess that's the way it had to be."

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Then she hung up.

The mom was relieved that Rashmi was all right, furious that she was with Christers. So what? I'd found the girl: case closed. Only Najma Jones begged me to help her connect with her daughter. She was already into me for twenty bucks plus expenses, but for another five I said I'd try to get her away from the church long enough for them to talk. I was on my way over when the searchlet I'd attached to the Jones account turned up the hit at Grayle's Shoes. I was grateful for the reprieve, even more pleased when the salesbot identified Rashmi from her pix. As did the waitress at Maison Diana.

And the clerk at the Comfort Inn.

3

Ronald Reagan Elementary had been recently renovated, no doubt by a squad of janitor bots. The brick façade had been cleaned and repointed; the long row of windows gleamed like teeth. The asphalt playground had been ripped up and resurfaced with safe-t-mat, the metal swingsets swapped for gaudy towers and crawl tubes and slides and balance beams and decks. The chain link fences had been replaced by redwood lattice through which twined honeysuckle and clematis. There was a boxwood maze next to the swimming pool that shimmered, blue as a dream. Nothing was too good for the little girls—our hope for the future.

There was no room in the rack jammed with bikes and scooters and goboards, so I leaned my bike against a nearby cherry tree. The very youngest girls had come out for first recess. I paused behind the tree for a moment to let their whoops and shrieks and laughter bubble over me. My business didn't take me to schools very often; I couldn't remember when I had last seen so many girls in one place. They were black and white and yellow and brown, mostly dressed like janes you might see anywhere. But there were more than a few whose clothes proclaimed their mothers' lifestyles. Tommys in hunter camo and chaste Christers, twists in chains and spray-on, clumps of sisters wearing the uniforms of a group marriage, a couple of furries and one girl wearing a body suit that looked just like bot skin. As I lingered there, I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the shade of a tree. I had no idea who these tiny creatures were. They went to this well-kept school, led more or less normal lives. I grew up in the wild times, when everything was falling apart. At that moment, I realized that they were as far removed from me as I was from the grannies. I would always watch them from a distance.

Just inside the fence, two sisters in green-striped shirtwaists and green knee socks were turning a rope for a ponytailed jumper who was executing nimble criss-crosses. The turners chanted,

"Down in the valley where the green grass grows,

there sits Stacy pretty as a rose! She sings, she sings, she sings so sweet,

Then along comes Chantall to kiss her on the cheek!"

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Another jumper joined her in the middle, matching her step for step, her dark hair flying. The chant continued,

"How many kisses does she get?

One, two, three, four, five. . . ."

The two jumpers pecked at each other in the air to the count of ten without missing a beat. Then Ponytail skipped out and the turners began the chant over again for the dark-haired girl. Ponytail bent over for a moment to catch her breath; when she straightened, she noticed me.

"Hey you, behind the tree." She shaded her eyes with a hand. "You hiding?"

I stepped into the open. "No."

"This is our school, you know." The girl set one foot behind the other and then spun a hundred and eighty degrees to point at the door to the school. "You supposed to sign in at the office."

"I'd better take care of that then."

As I passed through the gate into the playground, a few of the girls stopped playing and stared. This was all the audience Ponytail needed. "You someone's mom?"

"No."

"Don't you have a job?" She fell into step beside me.

"I do."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you."

She dashed ahead to block my path. "Probably because it's a pretend job."

Two of her sisters in green-striped shirtwaists scrambled to back her up.

"When we grow up," one of them announced, "we're going to have real jobs."

"Like a doctor," the other said. "Or a lion tamer."

Other girls were joining us. "I want to drive a truck," said a tommy. "Big, big truck." She specified the size of her rig with outstretched arms.

"That's not a real job. Any bot could do that."

"I want to be a teacher," said the dark-haired sister who had been jumping rope.

"Chantall loves school," said a furry. "She'd marry school if she could." Apparently this passed for brilliant wit in the third grade; some girls laughed so hard they had to cover their mouths with the backs of their hands. Me, I was flummoxed. Give me a spurned lover or a mean drunk or a hardcase cop and I could figure out some play, but just then I was trapped by this giggling mob of children.

"So why you here?" Ponytail put her fists on her hips.

A jane in khakis and a baggy plum sweater emerged from behind a blue tunnel that looked like a centipede. She pinned me with that penetrating but not unkind stare that teachers are born with, and began to trudge across the playground toward me. "I've come to see Ms. Jones," I said.

"Oh." A shadow passed over Ponytail's face and she rubbed her hands against the sides of her legs. "You better go then."

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Someone called, "Are you the undertaker?"

A voice that squeaked with innocence asked, "What's an undertaker?"

I didn't hear the answer. The teacher in the plum sweater rescued me and we passed through the crowd.

I didn't understand why Najma Jones had come to school. She was either the most dedicated teacher on the planet or she was too numb to accept her daughter's death. I couldn't tell which. She had been reserved when we met the first time; now she was locked down and welded shut. She was a bird of a woman with a narrow face and thin lips. Her gray hair had a few lingering strands of black. She wore a long-sleeved white kameez tunic over shalwar trousers. I leaned against the door of her classroom and told her everything I had done the day before. She sat listening at her desk with a sandwich that she wasn't going to eat and a carton of milk that she wasn't going to drink and a napkin that she didn't need.

When I had finished, she asked me about cyanide inhalers.

"Hydrogen cyanide isn't hard to get in bulk," I said. "They use it for making plastic, engraving, tempering steel. The inhaler came from one of the underground suicide groups, probably Our Choice. The cops could tell you for sure."

She unfolded the napkin and spread it out on top of her desk. "I've heard it's a painful death."

"Not at all," I said. "They used to use hydrogen cyanide gas to execute criminals, back in the bad old days. It all depends on the first breath. Get it deep into your lungs and you're unconscious before you hit the floor. Dead in less than a minute."

"And if you don't get a large enough dose?"

"Ms. Jones . . ."

She cut me off hard. "If you don't?"

"Then it takes longer, but you still die. There are convulsions. The skin flushes and turns purple. Eyes bulge. They say it's something like having a heart attack."

"Rashmi?" She laid her daughter's name down gently, as if she were tucking it into bed. "How did she die?"

Had the cops shown her the crime scene pictures? I decided they hadn't. "I don't think she suffered," I said.

She tore a long strip off the napkin. "You don't think I'm a very good mother, do you?"

I don't know exactly what I expected her to say, but this wasn't it. "Ms. Jones, I don't know much about you and your daughter. But I do know that you cared enough about her to hire me. I'm sorry I let you down."

She shook her head wearily, as if I had just flunked the pop quiz. One third does not equal .033 and Los Angeles has never been the capital of California. "Is there anything else I should know?" she said.

"There is." I had to tell her what I'd found out that morning, but I wasn't going to tell her that I was working for a devil. "You mentioned before that Rashmi had a friend named Kate."

"The Christer?" She tore another strip off the napkin.

I nodded. "Her name is Kate Vermeil. I don't know this for sure yet, but

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there's reason to believe that Rashmi and Kate were married yesterday. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Maybe yesterday it might have." Her voice was flat. "It doesn't anymore."

I could hear stirring in the next classroom. Chairs scraped against linoleum. Girls were jabbering at each other.

"I know Rashmi became a Christer," she said. "It's a broken religion. But then everything is broken, isn't it? My daughter and I . . . I don't think we ever understood each other. We were strangers at the end." The napkin was in shreds. "How old were you when it happened?"

"I wasn't born yet." She didn't have to explain what *it* was. "I'm not as old as I look."

"I was nineteen. I remember men, my father, my uncles. And the boys. I actually slept with one." She gave me a bleak smile. "Does that shock you, Ms. Hardaway?"

I hated it when grannies talked about having sex, but I just shook my head.

"I didn't love Sunil, but I said I'd marry him just so I could get out of my mother's house. Maybe that was what was happening with Rashmi and this Kate person?"

"I wouldn't know."

The school bell rang.

"I'm wearing white today, Ms. Hardaway, to honor my darling daughter." She gathered up the strips of napkin and the sandwich and the carton of milk and dropped them in the trashcan. "White is the Hindu color of mourning. But it's also the color of knowledge. The goddess of learning, Saraswati, is always shown wearing a white dress, sitting on a white lotus. There is something here I must learn." She fingered the gold embroidery at the neckline of her kameez. "But it's time for recess."

We walked to the door. "What will you do now?" She opened it. The fifth grade swarmed the hall, girls rummaging through their lockers.

"Find Kate Vermeil," I said.

She nodded. "Tell her I'm sorry."

4

I tried Kate's call again, but when all I got was the sidekick I biked across town to 44 East Washington Avenue. The Poison Society turned out to be a jump joint; the sign said it opened at nine PM. There was no bell on the front door, but I knocked hard enough to wake Marilyn Monroe. No answer. I went around to the back and tried again. If Kate was in there, she wasn't entertaining visitors.

A sidekick search turned up an open McDonald's on Wallingford, a ten-minute ride. The only other customers were a couple of twists with bound breasts and identical acid-green vinyl masks. One of them crouched on the floor beside the other, begging for chicken nuggets. A bot took my order for the 29¢ combo meal—it was all bots behind the counter. By law, there was supposed to be a human running the place, but if she was on

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the premises, she was nowhere to be seen. I thought about calling City Hall to complain, but the egg rolls arrived crispy and the McLatte was nicely scalded. Besides, I didn't need to watch the cops haul the poor jane in charge out of whatever hole she had fallen into.

A couple of hardcase tommys in army surplus fatigues had strutted in just after me. They ate with their heads bowed over their plastic trays so the fries didn't have too far to travel. Their collapsible titanium nightsticks lay on the table in plain sight. One of them was not quite as wide as a bus. The other was nothing special, except that when I glanced up from my sidekick, she was giving me a freeze-dried stare. I waggled my shiny fingernails at her and screwed my cutest smile onto my face. She scowled, said something to her partner and went back to the trough.

My sidekick chirped. It was my pal Julie Epstein, who worked Self-Endangerment/Missing Persons out of the second precinct.

"You busy, Fay?"

"Yeah, the Queen of Cleveland just lost her glass slipper and I'm on the case."

"Well, I'm about to roll through your neighborhood. Want to do lunch?"

I aimed the sidekick at the empties on my table. "Just finishing."

"Where are you?"

"McD's on Wallingford."

"Yeah? How are the ribs?"

"Couldn't say. But the egg rolls are triple dee."

"That the place where the owner is a junkliner? We've had complaints. Bots run everything?"

"No, I can see her now. She's shortchanging some beat cop."

She gave me the laugh. "Got the coroner's on the Rashmi Jones. Cyanide induced hypoxia."

"You didn't by any chance show the mom pix of the scene?"

"Hell no. Talk about cruel and unusual." She frowned. "Why?"

"I was just with her. She seemed like maybe she suspected her kid wrestled with the reaper."

"We didn't tell her. By the way, we don't really care if you call your client, but next time how about trying us first?"

"That's cop law. Me, I follow PI law."

"Where did you steal that line from, *Chinatown?*"

"It's got better dialogue than *Dragnet*." I swirled the last of my latte in the cup. "You calling a motive on the Rashmi Jones?"

"Not yet. What do you like?" She ticked off the fingers of her left hand. "Family? School? Money? Broke a fingernail? Cloudy day?"

"Pregnancy? Just a hunch."

"You think she was seeded? We'll check that. But that's no reason to kill yourself."

"They've all got reasons. Only none of them makes sense."

She frowned. "Hey, don't get all invested on me here."

"Tell me, Julie, do you think I'm doing a pretend job?"

"Whoa, Fay." Her chuckle had a sharp edge. "Maybe it's time you and Sharifa took a vacation."

"Yeah." I let that pass. "It's just that some granny called me a fluff."

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"Grannies." She snorted in disgust. "Well, you're no cop, that's for sure. But we do appreciate the help. Yeah, I'd say what you do is real. As real as anything in this cocked world."

"Thanks, flatfoot. Now that you've made things all better, I'll just click off. My latte is getting cold and you're missing so damn many persons."

"Think about that vacation, shamus. Bye."

As I put my sidekick away, I realized that the tommys were waiting for me. They'd been rattling ice in their cups and folding McWrappers for the past ten minutes. I probably didn't need their brand of trouble. The smart move would be to bolt for the door and leave my bike for now; I could lose them on foot. But then I hadn't made a smart move since April. The big one was talking into her sidekick when I sauntered over to them.

"What can I do for you ladies?" I said.

The big one pocketed the sidekick. Her partner started to come out of her seat but the big one stretched an arm like a telephone pole to restrain her.

"Do we know you?" The partner had close-set eyes and a beak nose; her black hair was short and stiff as a brush. She was wearing a black tee under her fatigue jacket and black leather combat boots. Probably had steel toes. "No," she continued, "I don't think we do."

"Then let's get introductions out of the way," I said. "I'm Fay Hardaway. And you are. . . ?"

They gave me less than nothing.

I sat down. "Thanks," I said. "Don't mind if I do."

The big one leaned back in her chair and eyed me as if I was dessert. "Sure you're not making a mistake, missy?"

"Why, because you're rough, tough, and take no guff?"

"You're funny." She smirked. "I like that. People who meet us are usually so very sad. My name is Alix." She held out her hand and we shook. "Pleased to know you."

The customary way to shake hands is to hold on for four, maybe five seconds, squeeze goodbye, then loosen the grip. Maybe big Alix wasn't familiar with our customs—she wasn't letting go.

I wasn't going to let a little thing like a missing hand intimidate me. "Oh, then I do know you," I said. We were in the McDonald's on Wallingford Street—a public place. I'd just been talking to my pal the cop. I was so damn sure that I was safe, I decided to take my shot. "That would make the girlfriend here Elaine. Or is it Gratiana?"

"Alix." The beak panicked. "Now we've got to take her."

Alix sighed, then yanked on my arm. She might have been pulling a tissue from a box for all the effort she expended. I slid halfway across the table as the beak whipped her nightstick to full extension. I lunged away from her and she caught me just a glancing blow above the ear but then Alix stuck a popper into my face and spattered me with knockout spray. I saw a billion stars and breathed the vacuum of deep space for maybe two seconds before everything went black.

Big Ben chimed between my ears. I could feel it deep in my molars, in the jelly of my eyes. It was the first thing I had felt since World War II. Wait a minute, was I alive during World War II? No, but I had seen the

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movie. When I wiggled my toes, Big Ben chimed again. I realized that the reason it hurt so much was that the human head didn't really contain enough space to hang a bell of that size. As I took inventory of body parts, the chiming became less intense. By the time I knew I was all there, it was just the sting of blood in my veins.

I was laid out on a surface that was hard but not cold. Wood. A bench. The place I was in was huge and dim but not dark. The high ceiling was in shadow. There was a hint of smoke in the air. Lights flickered. Candles. That was a clue, but I was still too groggy to understand what the mystery was. I knew I needed to remember something, but there was a hole where the memory was supposed to be. I reached back and touched just above my ear. The tip of my finger came away dark and sticky.

A voice solved the mystery for me. "I'm sorry that my people overreacted. If you want to press charges, I've instructed Gratiana and Alix to surrender to the police."

It came back to me then. It always does. McDonald's. Big Alix. A long handshake. That would make this a church. I sat up. When the world stopped spinning, I saw a vast marble altar awash in light with a crucifix the size of a Cessna hanging behind it.

"I hope you're not in too much pain, Miss Hardaway." The voice came from the pew behind me. A fortyish woman in a black suit and a Roman collar was on the kneeler. She was wearing a large silver ring on the fourth finger of her left hand.

"I've felt worse."

"That's too bad. Do you make a habit of getting into trouble?" She looked concerned that I might be making some bad life choices. She had soft eyes and a kindly face. Her short hair was the color of ashes. She was someone I could tell my guilty secrets to, so I could sleep at night. She would speak to Christ the Man himself on my behalf, book me into the penthouse suite in heaven.

"Am I in trouble?"

She nodded gravely. "We all are. The devils are destroying us, Miss Hardaway. They plant their seed not only in our bodies, but our minds and our souls."

"Please, call me Fay. I'm sure we're going to be just the very best of friends." I leaned toward her. "I'm sorry, I can't read your name tag."

"I'm not wearing one." She smiled. "I'm Father Elaine Horváth."

We looked at each other.

"Have you ever considered suicide, Fay?" said Father Elaine.

"Not really. It's usually a bad career move."

"Very good. But you must know that since the devils came and changed everything, almost a billion women have despaired and taken their lives."

"You know, I think I did hear something about that. Come on, lady, what's this about?"

"It is the tragedy of our times that there are any number of good reasons to kill oneself. It takes courage to go on living with the world the way it is. Rashmi Jones was a troubled young woman. She lacked that courage. That doesn't make her a bad person, just a dead one."

I patted my pocket, looking for my sidekick. Still there. I pulled it out

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and pressed *record*. I didn't ask for permission. "So I should mind my own business?"

"That would be a bad career move in your profession. How old are you, Fay?"

"Thirty-three."

"Then you were born of a virgin." She leaned back, slid off the kneeler and onto the pew. "Seeded by the devils. I'm old enough to have had a father, Fay. I actually remember him a little. A very little."

"Don't start." I spun out of the pew into the aisle. I hated cock nostalgia. This granny had me chewing aluminum foil; I would have spat it at Christ himself if he had dared come down off his cross. "You want to know one reason why my generation jumps out of windows and sucks on cyanide? It's because twists like you make us feel guilty about how we came to be. You want to call me devil's spawn, go ahead. Enjoy yourself. Live it up. Because we're just waiting for you old bitches to die off. Someday this foolish church is going to dry up and blow away and you know what? We'll go dancing that night, because we'll be a hell of a lot happier without you to remind us of what you lost and who we can never be."

She seemed perversely pleased by my show of emotion. "You're an angry woman, Fay."

"Yeah," I said, "but I'm kind to children and small animals."

"What is that anger doing to your soul? Many young people find solace in Christ."

"Like Alix and Gratiana?"

She folded her hands; the silver ring shone dully. "As I said, they have offered to turn themselves . . ."

"Keep them. I'm done with them." I was cooling off fast. I paused, considering my next move. Then I sat down on the pew next to Father Elaine, showed her my sidekick and made sure she saw me pause the recording. Our eyes met. We understood each other. "Did you marry Kate Vermeil and Rashmi Jones yesterday?"

She didn't hesitate. "I performed the ceremony. I never filed the documents."

"Do you know why Rashmi killed herself?"

"Not exactly." She held my gaze. "I understand she left a note."

"Yeah, the note. I found it on her sidekick. She wrote, 'Life is too hard to handle and I can't handle it so I've got to go now. I love you Mom sorry.' A little generic for a would-be writer, wouldn't you say? And the thing is, there's nothing in the note about Kate. I didn't even know she existed until this morning. Now I have a problem with that. The cops would have the same problem if I gave it to them."

"But you haven't."

"Not yet."

She thought about that for a while.

"My understanding," said Father Elaine at last, "is that Kate and Rashmi had a disagreement shortly after the ceremony." She was tiptoeing around words as if one of them might wake up and start screaming. "I don't know exactly what it was about. Rashmi left, Kate stayed here. Someone was with her all yesterday afternoon and all last night."

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"Because you thought she might need an alibi?"

She let that pass. "Kate was upset when she heard the news. She blames herself, although I am certain she is without blame."

"She's here now?"

"No." Father Elaine shrugged. "I sent her away when I learned you were looking for her."

"And you want me to stop."

"You are being needlessly cruel, you know. The poor girl is grieving."

"Another poor girl is dead." I reached into my pocket for my penlight. "Can I see your ring?"

That puzzled her. She extended her left hand and I shone the light on it. Her skin was freckled but soft, the nails flawless. She would not be getting them done at a dump like the Adagio Spa.

"What do these letters mean?" I asked. "IHS?"

"*In hoc signo vinces*. 'In this sign you will conquer.' The emperor Constantine had a vision of a cross in the sky with those words written in fire on it. This was just before a major battle. He had his soldiers paint the cross on their shields and then he won the day against a superior force."

"Cute." I snapped the light off. "What's it mean to you?"

"The Bride of God herself gave this to me." Her face lit up, as if she were listening to an angelic chorus chant her name. "In recognition of my special vocation. You see, Fay, our Church has no intention of drying up and blowing away. Long after my generation is gone, believers will continue to gather in Christ's name. And someday they'll finish the work we have begun. Someday they will exorcise the devils."

If she knew how loopy that sounded, she didn't show it. "Okay, here's the way it is," I said. "Forget Kate Vermeil. I only wanted to find her so she could lead me to you. A devil named Seeren hired me to look for a certain party wearing a ring like yours. It wants a meeting."

"With me?" Father Elaine went pale. "What for?"

"I just find them." I enjoyed watching her squirm. "I don't ask why."

She folded her hands as if to pray, then leaned her head against them and closed her eyes. She sat like that for almost a minute. I decided to let her brood, not that I had much choice. The fiery pit of hell could've opened up and she wouldn't have noticed.

Finally, she shivered and sat up. "I have to find out how much they know." She gazed up at the enormous crucifix. "I'll see this devil, but on one condition: you guarantee my safety."

"Sure." I couldn't help myself; I laughed. The sound echoed, profaning the silence. "Just how am I supposed to do that? They disappeared half the population of Earth without breaking a sweat."

"You have their confidence," she said. "And mine."

A vast and absurd peace had settled over her; she was seeing the world through the gauze of faith. She was a fool if she thought I could go up against the devils. Maybe she believed Christ the Man would swoop down from heaven to protect her, but then he hadn't been seen around the old neighborhood much of late. Or maybe she had projected herself into the mind of the martyrs who would embrace the sword, kiss the ax that

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would take their heads. I reminded myself that her delusions were none of my business.

Besides, I needed the money. And suddenly I just had to get out of that big, empty church.

"My office is at 35 Market," I said. "Third floor. I'll try to set something up for six tonight." I stood. "Look, if they want to take you, you're probably gone. But I'll record everything and squawk as loud as I can."

"I believe you will," she said, her face aglow.

5

I didn't go to my office after I locked my bike to the rack on Market Street. Instead I went to find George. He was stripping varnish from the beadboard wainscoting in Donna Belasco's old office on the fifth floor. Donna's office had been vacant since last fall, when she had closed her law practice and gone south to count waves at Daytona Beach. At least, that's what I hoped she was doing; the last I'd heard from her was a Christmas card. I missed Donna; she was one of the few grannies who tried to understand what it was like to grow up the way we did. And she had been generous about steering work my way.

"Hey George," I said. "You can tell your boss that I found the ring."

"This one offers the congratulations." The arm holding the brush froze over the can of stripper as he swiveled his head to face me. "You have proved true superiority, Fay." George had done a good job maintaining our building since coming to us a year ago, although he had something against wood grain. We had to stop him from painting over the mahogany paneling in the foyer.

I hated to close the doorbut this conversation needed some privacy. "So I've set up a meeting." The stink of the varnish stripper was barbed wire up my nose. "Father Elaine Horváth will be here at six."

George said nothing. Trying to read a bot is like trying to read a refrigerator. I assumed that he was relaying this information to Seeren. Would the devil be displeased that I had booked its meeting into my office?

"Seeren is impressed by your speedy accomplishment," George said at last. "Credit has been allotted to this one for suggesting it task you."

"Great, take ten bucks a month off my rent. Just so you know, I promised Father Elaine she'd be safe here. Seeren is not going to make a liar out of me, is it?"

"Seeren rejects violence. It's a regrettable technique."

"Yeah, but if Seeren disappears her to wherever, does that count?"

George's head swiveled back toward the wainscoting. "Father Elaine Horváth will be invited to leave freely, if such is her intention." The brush dipped into the can. "Was Kate Vermeil also found?"

"No," I said. "I looked, but then Father Elaine found me. By the way, she didn't live at 465 12th Avenue."

"Seeren had otherwise information." The old varnish bubbled and sagged where George had applied stripper. "Such error makes a curiosity."

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It was a little thing, but it pricked at me as I walked down to the third floor. Was I pleased to discover that the devils were neither omnipotent nor infallible? Not particularly. For all their crimes against humanity, the devils and their bots were pretty much running our world now. It had been a small if bitter comfort to imagine that they knew exactly what they were doing.

I passed crazy Martha's door, which was open, on the way to my office. "Yaga combany wading," she called.

I backtracked. My neighbor was at her desk, wearing her Technopro gas mask, which she claimed protected her from chlorine, hydrogen sulfide, sulfur dioxide, ammonia, bacteria, viruses, dust, pollen, cat dander, mold spores, nuclear fallout, and sexual harassment. Unfortunately, it also made her almost unintelligible.

"Try that again," I said.

"You've. Got. Company. Waiting."

"Who is it?"

She shook the mask and shrugged. The light of her desktop was reflected in the faceplate. I could see numbers swarming like black ants across the rows and columns of a spreadsheet.

"What's with the mask?"

"We. Had. A. Devil. In. The. Building."

"Really?" I said. "When?"

"Morning."

There was no reason why a devil shouldn't come into our building, no law against having one for a client. But there was an accusation in Martha's look that I couldn't deny. Had I betrayed us all by taking the case? She said, "Hate. Devils."

"Yeah," I said. "Me too."

I opened my door and saw that it was Sharifa who was waiting for me. She was trying on a smile that didn't fit. "Hi Fay," she said. She looked as elegant as always and as weary as I had ever seen her. She was wearing a peppered black linen dress and black dress sandals with thin crossover straps. Those weren't doctor shoes—they were pull down the shades and turn up the music shoes. They made me very sad.

As I turned to close the door, she must have spotted the patch of blood that had dried in my hair. "You're hurt!" I had almost forgotten about it—there was no percentage in remembering that I was in pain. She shot out of her chair. "What happened?"

"I slipped in the shower," I said.

"Let me look."

I tilted my head toward her and she probed the lump gently. "You could have a concussion."

"PI's don't get concussions. Says so right on the license."

"Sit," she said. " Let me clean this up. I'll just run to the bathroom for some water."

I sat and watched her go. I thought about locking the door behind her but I deserved whatever I had coming. I opened the bottom drawer of the desk, slipped two plastic cups off the stack and brought Johnnie Walker in for a consultation.

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Sharifa bustled through the doorway with a cup of water in one hand and a fistful of paper towels in the other but caught herself when she saw the bottle. "When did this start?"

"Just now." I picked up my cup and slugged two fingers of Black Label Scotch. "Want some?"

"I don't know," she said. "Are we having fun or are we self-medicating?"

I let that pass. She dabbed at the lump with a damp paper towel. I could smell her perfume, lemon blossoms on a summer breeze and just the smallest bead of sweat. Her scent got along nicely with the liquid smoke of the scotch. She brushed against me and I could feel her body beneath her dress. At that moment I wanted her more than I wanted to breathe.

"Sit down," I said.

"I'm not done yet," she said.

I pointed at a chair. "Sit, damn it."

She dropped the paper towel in my trash as she went by.

"You asked me a question this morning," I said. "I should've given you the answer. I had the abortion last week."

She studied her hands. I don't know why; they weren't doing anything. They were just sitting in her lap, minding their own business.

"I told you when we first got together, that's what I'd do when I got seeded," I said.

"I know."

"I just didn't see any good choices," I said. "I know the world needs children, but I have a life to lead. Maybe it's a rude, pointless, dirty life but it's what I have. Being a mother . . . that's someone else's life."

"I understand," said Sharifa. Her voice was so small it could have crawled under a thimble. "It's just . . . it was all so sudden. You told me and then we were fighting and I didn't have time to think things through."

"I got tested in the morning. I told you that afternoon. I wasn't keeping anything a secret."

She folded her arms against her chest as if she were cold. "And when I get seeded, what then?"

"You'll do what's best for you."

She sighed. "Pour me some medication, would you?"

I poured scotch into both cups, came around the desk, and handed Sharifa hers. She drank, held the whiskey in her mouth for a moment and then swallowed.

"Fay, I . . ." The corners of her mouth were twitchy and she bit her lip. "Your mother told me once that when she realized she was pregnant with you, she was so happy. So happy. It was when everything was crashing around everyone. She said you were the gift she needed to . . . not to . . ."

"I got the gift lecture, Sharifa. Too many times. She made the devils sound like Santa Claus. Or the stork."

She glanced down as if surprised to discover that she was still holding the cup. She drained it at a gulp and set it on my desk. "I'm a doctor. I know they do this to us; I just wish I knew how. But it isn't a bad thing. Having you in the world can't be a bad thing."

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I wasn't sure about that, but I kept my opinion to myself.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm trying to carry water in my hands but it's all leaking out and there's nothing I can do to stop it." She started rubbing her right hand up and down her left forearm. "People keep killing themselves. Maybe it's not as bad as it used to be, but still. The birth rate is barely at replacement levels. Maybe we're doomed. Did you ever think that? That we might go extinct?"

"No."

Sharifa was silent for a long time. She kept rubbing her arm. "It should've been me doing your abortion," she said at last. "Then we'd both have to live with it."

I was one tough PI. I kept a bottle of scotch in the bottom drawer and had a devil for a client. Tommys whacked me with nightsticks and pumped knockout spray into my face. But even I had a breaking point, and Dr. Sharifa Ramirez was pushing me up against it hard. I wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her forehead, her cheeks, her graceful neck. But I couldn't give in to her that way—not now anyway. Maybe never again. I had a case, and I needed to hold the best part of myself in reserve until it was finished. "I'll be in charge of the guilt, Sharifa," I said. "You be in charge of saving lives." I came around the desk. "I've got work to do, so you go home now, sweetheart." I kissed her on the forehead. "I'll see you there."

Easier to say than to believe.

6

Sharifa was long gone by the time Father Elaine arrived at ten minutes to six. She brought muscle with her; Gratiana loitered in the hallway surveying my office with sullen calculation, as if estimating how long it would take to break down the door, leap over the desk, and wring somebody's neck. I shouldn't have been surprised that Father Elaine's faith in me had wavered—hell, I didn't have much faith in me either. However, I thought she showed poor judgment in bringing this particular thug along. I invited Gratiana to remove herself from my building. Perhaps she might perform an auto-erotic act in front of a speeding bus? Father Elaine dismissed her, and she slunk off.

Father Elaine appeared calm, but I could tell that she was as nervous as two mice and a gerbil. I hadn't really had a good look at her in the dim church, but now I studied her in case I had to write her up for the Missing Persons Index. She was a tallish woman with round shoulders and a bit of a stoop. Her eyes were the brown of wet sand; her cheeks were bloodless. Her smile was not quite as convincing in good light as it had been in gloom. She made some trifling small talk, which I did nothing to help with. Then she stood at the window, watching. A wingtip loafer tapped against bare floor.

It was about ten after when my desktop chirped. I waved open the icon and accepted the transfer of a thousand dollars. Seeren had a hell of a

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calling card. "I think they're coming," I said. I opened the door and stepped into the hall to wait for them.

"It gives Seeren the bright pleasure to meet you, Father Elaine Horváth," said George as they shuffled into the office.

She focused everything she had on the devil. "Just Father, if you don't mind." The bot was nothing but furniture to her.

"It's kind of crowded in here," I said. "If you want, I can wait outside. . . ."

Father Elaine's façade cracked for an instant, but she patched it up nicely. "I'm sure we can manage," she said.

"This one implores Fay to remain," said George.

We sorted ourselves out. Seeren assumed its perch on top of the file cabinet and George came around and compacted himself next to me. Father Elaine pushed her chair next to the door. I think she was content to be stationed nearest the exit. George looked at Father Elaine. She looked at Seeren. Seeren looked out the window. I watched them all.

"Seeren offers sorrow over the regrettable death of Rashmi Jones," said George. "Such Rashmi was of your church?"

"She was a member, yes."

"According to Fay Hardaway, a fact is that Father married Kate Vermeil and Rashmi Jones."

I didn't like that. I didn't like it at all.

Father Elaine hesitated only a beat. "Yes."

"Would Father permit Seeren to locate Kate Vermeil?"

"I know where she is, Seeren," said Father Elaine. "I don't think she needs to be brought into this."

"Indulge this one and reconsider, Father. Is such person pregnant?"

Her manner had been cool, but now it dropped forty degrees. "Why would you say that?"

"Perhaps such person is soon to become pregnant?"

"How would I know? If she is, it would be your doing, Seeren."

"Father well understands *in vitro* fertilization?"

"I've heard of it, yes." Father Elaine's shrug was far too elaborate. "I can't say I understand it."

"Father has heard then of transvaginal oocyte retrieval?"

She thrust out her chin. "No."

"Haploidisation of somatic cells?"

She froze.

"Has Father considered then growing artificial sperm from embryonic stem cells?"

"I'm a priest, Seeren." Only her lips moved. "Not a biologist."

"Does the Christer Church make further intentions to induce pregnancies in certain members? Such as Kate Vermeil?"

Father Elaine rose painfully from the chair. I thought she might try to run, but now martyr's fire burned through the shell of ice that had encased her. "We're doing Christ's work, Seeren. We reject your obscene seeding. We are saving ourselves from you and you can't stop us."

Seeren beat its wings, once, twice, and crowed. It was a dense, jarring sound, like steel scraping steel. I hadn't known that devils could make any sound at all, but hearing that hellish scream made me want to dive

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under my desk and curl up in a ball. I took it though, and so did Father Elaine. I gave her credit for that.

"Seeren makes no argument with the Christer Church," said George. "Seeren upholds only the brightest encouragement for such pregnancies."

Father Elaine's face twitched in disbelief and then a flicker of disappointment passed over her. Maybe she was upset to have been cheated of her glorious death. She was a granny after all, of the generation that had embraced the suicide culture. For the first time, she turned to the bot. "What?"

"Seeren tasks Father to help numerous Christers become pregnant. Christers who do such choosing will then give birth."

She sank back onto her chair.

"Too many humans now refuse the seeding," said the bot. "Not all then give birth. This was not foreseen. It is regrettable."

Without my noticing, my hands had become fists. My knuckles were white.

"Seeren will announce its true satisfaction with the accomplishment of the Christer Church. It offers a single caution. Christers must assure all to make no XY chromosome."

Father Elaine was impassive. "Will you continue to seed all nonbelievers?"

"It is prudent for the survival of humans."

She nodded and faced Seeren. "How will you know if we do try to bring men back into the world?"

The bot said nothing. The silence thickened as we waited. Maybe the devil thought it didn't need to make threats.

"Well, then." Father Elaine rose once again. Some of the stoop had gone out of her shoulders. She was trying to play it calm, but I knew she'd be skipping by the time she hit the sidewalk. Probably she thought she had won a great victory. In any event, she was done with this little party.

But it was my little party, and I wasn't about to let it break up with the devils holding hands with the Christers. "Wait," I said. "Father, you better get Gratiana up here. And if you've got any other muscle in the neighborhood, call them right now. You need backup fast."

Seeren glanced away from the window and at me.

"Why?" Father Elaine already had her sidekick out. "What is this?"

"There's a problem."

"Fay Hardaway," said George sharply. "Indulge this one and recall your task. Your employment has been accomplished."

"Then I'm on my own time now, George." I thought maybe Seeren would try to leave, but it remained on its perch. Maybe the devil didn't care what I did. Or else it found me amusing. I could be an amusing girl, in my own obtuse way.

Gratiana tore the door open. She held her nightstick high, as if expecting to dive into a bloodbath. When she saw our cool tableau, she let it drop to her side.

"Scooch over, Father," I said, "and let her in. Gratiana, you can leave the door open but keep that toothpick handy. I'm pretty sure you're going to be using it before long."

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"The others are right behind me, Father," said Gratiana as she crowded into the room. "Two, maybe three minutes."

"Just enough time." I let my hand fall to the middle drawer of my desk. "I have a question for you, Father." I slid the drawer open. "How did Seeren know all that stuff about haploid this and *in vitro* that?"

"It's a devil." She watched me thoughtfully. "They come from two hundred light years away. How do they know anything?"

"Fair enough. But they also knew that you married Kate and Rashmi. George here just said that I told them, except I never did. That was a mistake. It made me wonder whether they knew who you were all along. It's funny, I used to be convinced that the devils were infallible, but now I'm thinking that they can screw up any day of the week, just like the rest of us. They're almost human that way."

"A regrettable misstatement was made." The bot's neck extended until his head was level with mine. "Indulge this one and refrain from further humiliation."

"I've refrained for too long, George. I've had a bellyful of refraining." I was pretty sure that George could see the open drawer, which meant that the devil would know what was in it as well. I wondered how far they'd let me go. "The question is, Father, if the devils already knew who you were, why would Seeren hire me to find you?"

"Go on," she said.

My chest was tight. Nobody tried to stop me, so I went ahead and stuck my head into the lion's mouth. Like that little girl at school, I'd always wanted to have a real job when I grew up. "You've got a leak, Father. Your problem isn't devil super-science. It's the good old-fashioned Judas kiss. Seeren has an inside source, a mole among your congregation. When it decided the time had come to meet with you, it wanted to be sure that none of you would suspect where its information was actually coming from. It decided that the way to give the mole cover was to hire some gullible PI to pretend to find stuff out. I may be a little slow and a lot greedy but I do have a few shreds of pride. I can't let myself be played for an idiot." I thought I heard footsteps on the stairs, but maybe it was just my own blood pounding. "You see, Father, I don't think that Seeren really trusts you. I sure didn't hear you promise just now not to be making little boys. And yes, if they find out about the boy babies, the devils could just disappear them, but you and the Bride of God and all your batty friends would find ways to make that very public, very messy. I'm guessing that's part of your plan, isn't it? To remind us who the devils are, what they did? Maybe get people into the streets again. Since the devils still need to know what you're up to, the mole had to be protected."

Father Elaine flushed with anger. "Do you know who she is?"

"No," I said. "But you could probably narrow it down to a very few. You said you married Rashmi and Kate, but that you never filed the documents. But you needed someone to witness the ceremony. Someone who was taking pix and would send one to Seeren. . . ."

Actually, my timing was a little off. Gratiana launched herself at me just as big Alix hurtled through the doorway. I had the air taser out of the

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drawer, but my plan had been for the Christers to clean up their own mess. I came out of my chair and raised the taser but even fifty thousand volts wasn't going to keep that snarling bitch off me.

I heard a huge wet pop, not so much an explosion as an implosion. There was a rush of air through the doorway but the room was preternaturally quiet, as if someone had just stopped screaming. We humans gaped at the void that had formerly been occupied by Gratiana. The familiar surroundings of my office seemed to warp and stretch to accommodate that vacancy. If she could vanish so completely, then maybe chairs could waltz on the ceiling and trashcans could sing *Carmen*. For the first time in my life I had a rough sense of what the grannies had felt when the devils disappeared their men. It would be one thing if Gratiana were merely dead, if there were blood, and bone and flesh left behind. A body to be buried. But this was an offense against reality itself. It undermined our common belief that the world is indeed a fact, that we exist at all. I could understand how it could unhinge a billion minds. I was standing next to Father Elaine beside the open door to my office holding the taser and I couldn't remember how I had gotten there.

Seeren hopped down off the bookcase as if nothing important had happened and wrapped its translucent wings around its body. The devil didn't seem surprised at all that a woman had just disappeared. Maybe there was no surprising a devil.

And then it occurred to me that this probably wasn't the first time since they had taken all the men that the devils had disappeared someone. Maybe they did it all the time. I thought of all the missing persons whom I had never found. I could see the files in Julie Epstein's office bulging with unsolved cases. Had Seeren done this thing to teach us the fragility of being? Or had it just been a clumsy attempt to cover up its regrettable mistakes?

As the devil waddled toward the door, Alix made a move as if to block its exit. After what had just happened, I thought that was probably the most boneheaded, brave move I had ever seen.

"Let them go." Father Elaine's voice quavered. Her eyes were like wounds.

Alix stepped aside and the devil and the bot left us. We listened to the devil scrabble down the hall. I heard the elevator doors open and then close.

Then Father Elaine staggered and put a hand on my shoulder. She looked like a granny now.

"There are no boy babies," she said. "Not yet. You have to believe me."

"You know what?" I shook free of her. "I don't care." I wanted them gone. I wanted to sit alone at my desk and watch the room fill with night.

"You don't understand."

"And I don't want to." I had to set the taser on the desk or I might have used it on her.

"Kate Vermeil is pregnant with one of our babies," said Father Elaine. "It's a little girl, I swear it."

"So you've made Seeren proud. What's the problem?"

Alix spoke for the first time. "Gratiana was in charge of Kate."

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7

The Poison Society was lit brightly enough to give a camel a headache. If you forgot your sunglasses, there was a rack of freebies at the door. Set into the walls were terrariums where diamondback rattlers coiled in the sand, black neck cobras dangled from dead branches and brown scorpions basked on ceramic rocks. The hemlock was in bloom; clusters of small, white flowers opened like umbrellas. Upright stems of monkshood were interplanted with death cap mushrooms in wine casks cut in half. Curare vines climbed the pergola over the alcohol bar.

I counted maybe fifty customers in the main room, which was probably a good crowd for a Wednesday night. I had no idea yet how many might be lurking in the specialty shops that opened off this space, where a nice girl might arrange for a guaranteed-safe session of sexual asphyxia either by hanging or drowning, or else get her cerebrum toasted by various brain lightning generators. I was hoping Kate was out in the open with the relatively sane folks. I didn't really want to poke around in the shops, but I would if I had to. I thought I owed it to Rashmi Jones.

I strolled around, pretending to look at various animals and plants, carrying a tumbler filled with a little Johnnie Walker Black Label and a lot of water. I knew Kate would be disguised but if I could narrow the field of marks down to three or four, I might actually snoop her. Of course, she might be on the other side of town, but this was my only play. My guess was that she'd switch styles, so I wasn't necessarily looking for a tommy. Her hair wouldn't be brunette, and her skin would probably be darker, and contacts could give her cat's eyes or zebra eyes or American flags, if she wanted. But even with padding and lifts she couldn't change her body type enough to fool a good scan. And I had her data from the Christer medical files loaded into my sidekick.

Father Elaine had tried Kate's call, but she wouldn't pick up. That made perfect sense since just about anyone could put their hands on software that could replicate voices. There were bots that could sing enough like Velma Stone to fool her own mother. Kate and Gratiana would have agreed on a safe word. Our problem was that Gratiana had taken it with her to hell, or wherever the devil had consigned her.

The first mark my sidekick picked out was a redhead in silk pajamas and lime green bunny slippers. A scan matched her to Kate's numbers to within 5 percent. I bumped into her just enough to plant the snoop, a sticky homing device the size of a baby tooth.

"'Scuse me, sorry." I said. "S-so sorry." I slopped some of my drink onto the floor.

She gave me a glare that would have withered a cactus and I noodled off. As soon as I was out of her sight, I hit the button on my sidekick to which I'd assigned Kate's call. When Kate picked up, the snoop would know if the call had come from me and signal my sidekick that I had found her. The redhead wasn't Kate. Neither was the bald jane in distressed leather.

The problem with trying to locate her this way was that if I kept calling her, she'd get suspicious and lose the sidekick.

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I lingered by a pufferfish aquarium. Next to it was a safe, and in front of that a tootsie fiddled with the combination lock. I scanned her and got a match to within 2 percent. She was wearing a spangle wig and a stretch lace dress with a ruffle front. When she opened the door of the safe, I saw that it was made of clear luxar. She reached in, then slammed the door and trotted off as if she were late for the last train of the night.

I peeked through the door of the safe. Inside was a stack of squat blue inhalers like the one Rashmi had used to kill herself. On the wall above the safe, the management of The Poison Society had spray-painted a mock graffiti. *21L 4R 11L*. There was no time to plant a snoop. I pressed the call button as I tailed her.

With a strangled cry, the tootsie yanked a sidekick from her clutch purse, dropped it to the floor, and stamped on it. She was wearing Donya Durand ice and taupe flat slingbacks.

As I moved toward her, Kate Vermeil saw me and ducked into one of the shops. She dodged past fifty-five gallon drums of carbon tetrachloride and dimethyl sulfate and burst through the rear door of the shop into an alley. I saw her fumbling with the cap of the inhaler. I hurled myself at her and caught at her legs. Her right shoe came off in my hand, but I grabbed her left ankle and she went down. She still had the inhaler and was trying to bring it to her mouth. I leapt on top of her and wrenched it away.

"Do you really want to kill yourself?" I aimed the inhaler at her face and screamed at her. "Do you, Kate? Do you?" The air in the alley was thick with despair and I was choking on it. "Come on, Kate. Let's do it!"

"No." Her head thrashed back and forth. "No, please. Stop."

Her terror fed mine. "Then what the hell are you doing with this thing?" I was shaking so badly that when I tried to pitch the inhaler into the dumpster, it hit the pavement only six feet away. I had come so close to screwing up. I climbed off her and rolled on my back and soaked myself in the night sky. When I screwed up, people died. "Cyanide is awful bad for the baby," I said.

"How do you know about my baby?" Her face was rigid with fear. "Who are you?"

I could breathe again, although I wasn't sure I wanted to. "Fay Hardaway." I gasped. "I'm a PI; I left you a message this morning. Najma Jones hired me to find her daughter."

"Rashmi is dead."

"I know," I said. "So is Gratiana." I sat up and looked at her. "Father Elaine will be glad to see you."

Kate's eyes were wide, but I don't think she was seeing the alley. "Gratiana said the devils would come after me." She was still seeing the business end of the inhaler. "She said that if I didn't hear from her by tomorrow then we had lost everything and I should . . . do it. You know, to protect the church. And just now my sidekick picked up three times in ten minutes only there was nobody there and so I knew it was time."

"That was me, Kate. Sorry." I retrieved the Donya Durand slingback I'd stripped off her foot and gave it back to her. "Tell me where you got this?"

"It was Rashmi's. We bought them together at Grayles. Actually I picked them out. That was before . . . I loved her, you know, but she was

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crazy. I can see that now, although it's kind of too late. I mean, she was okay when she was taking her meds, but she would stop every so often. She called it taking a vacation from herself. Only it was no vacation for anyone else, especially not for me. She decided to go off on the day we got married and didn't tell me and all of a sudden after the ceremony we got into this huge fight about the baby and who loved who more and she started throwing things at me—these shoes—and then ran out of the church barefoot. I don't think she ever really understood about . . . you know, what we were trying to do. I mean, I've talked to the Bride of God herself . . . but Rashmi." Kate rubbed her eye and her hand came away wet.

I sat her up and put my arm around her. "That's all right. Not really your fault. I think poor Rashmi must have been hanging by a thread. We all are. The whole human race, or what's left of it."

We sat there for a moment.

"I saw her mom this morning," I said. "She said to tell you she was sorry."

Kate sniffed. "Sorry? What for?"

I shrugged.

"I know she didn't have much use for me," said Kate. "At least that's what Rashmi always said. But as far as I'm concerned the woman was a saint to put up with Rashmi and her mood swings and all the acting out. She was always there for her. And the thing is, Rashmi hated her for it."

I got to my knees, then to my feet. I helped Kate up. The alley was dark, but that wasn't really the problem. Even in the light of day, I hadn't seen anything.

8

I had no trouble finding space at the bike rack in front of Ronald Reagan Elementary. The building seemed to be drowsing in the heavy morning air, its brick wings enfolding the empty playground. A janitor bot was vacuuming the swimming pool, another was plucking spent blossoms from the clematis fence. The bots were headache yellow; the letters RRE in puffy orange slanted across their torsos. The gardening bot informed me that school wouldn't start for an hour. That was fine with me. This was just a courtesy call, part of the total service commitment I made to all the clients whom I had failed. I asked if I could see Najma Jones and he said he doubted that any of the teachers were in quite this early but he walked me to the office. He paged her; I signed the visitors' log. When her voice crackled over the intercom, I told the bot that I knew the way to her classroom.

I paused at the open door. Rashmi's mom had her back to me. She was wearing a sleeveless navy dress with cream-colored dupatta scarf draped over her shoulders. She passed down a row of empty desks, perching origami animals at the center of each. There were three kinds of elephants, ducks and ducklings, a blue giraffe, a pink cat that might have been a lion.

"Please come in, Ms. Hardaway," she said without turning around. She had teacher radar; she could see behind her back and around a corner.

"I stopped by your house." I slouched into the room like a kid who had

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lost her civics homework. "I thought I might catch you before you left for school." I leaned against a desk in the front row and picked up the purple crocodile on it. "You fold these yourself?"

"I couldn't sleep last night," she said, "so finally I gave up and went for a walk. I ended up here. I like coming to school early, especially when no one else is around. There is so much time." She had one origami swan left over that she set on her own desk. "Staying after is different. If you're always the last one out at night, you're admitting that you haven't got anything to rush home to. It's pathetic, actually." She settled behind her desk and began opening windows on her desktop. "I've been teaching the girls to fold the ducks. They seem to like it. It's a challenging grade, the fifth. They come to me as bright and happy children and I am supposed to teach them fractions and pack them off to middle school. I shudder to think what happens to them there."

"How old are they?"

"Ten when they start. Most of them have turned eleven already. They graduate next week." She peered at the files she had opened. "Some of them."

"I take it on faith that I was eleven once," I said, "but I just don't remember."

"Your generation grew up in unhappy times." Her face glowed in the phosphors. "You haven't had a daughter yet, have you, Ms. Hardaway?"

"No."

We contemplated my childlessness for a moment.

"Did Rashmi like origami?" I didn't mean anything by it. I just didn't want to listen to the silence anymore.

"Rashmi?" She frowned, as if her daughter were a not-very-interesting kid she had taught years ago. "No. Rashmi was a difficult child."

"I found Kate Vermeil last night," I said. "I told her what you said, that you were sorry. She wanted to know what for."

"What for?"

"She said that Rashmi was crazy. And that she hated you for having her."

"She never hated me," said Najma quickly. "Yes, Rashmi was a sad girl. Anxious. What is this about, Ms. Hardaway?"

"I think you were at the Comfort Inn that night. If you want to talk about that, I would like to hear what you have to say. If not, I'll leave now."

She stared at me for a moment, her expression unreadable. "You know, I actually wanted to have many children." She got up from the desk, crossed the room and shut the door as if it were made of hand-blown glass. "When the seeding first began, I went down to City Hall and volunteered. That just wasn't done. Most women were horrified to find themselves pregnant. I talked to a bot, who took my name and address and then told me to go home and wait. If I wanted more children after my first, I was certainly encouraged to make a request. It felt like I was joining one of those mail order music clubs." She smiled and tugged at her dupatta. "But when Rashmi was born, everything changed. Sometimes she was such a needy baby, fussing to be picked up, but then she would lie in her crib for hours, listless and withdrawn. She started anti-depressants when she was five and they helped. And the Department of Youth Services issued me a full-time bot helper

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when I started teaching. But Rashmi was always a handful. And since I was all by myself, I didn't feel like I had enough to give to another child."

"You never married?" I asked. "Found a partner?"

"Married who?" Her voice rose sharply. "Another woman?" Her cheeks colored. "No. I wasn't interested in that."

Najma returned to her desk but did not sit down. "The girls will be coming soon." She leaned toward me, fists on the desktop. "What is it that you want to hear, Ms. Hardaway?"

"You found Rashmi before I did. How?"

"She called me. She said that she had had a fight with her girlfriend who was involved in some secret experiment that she couldn't tell me about and they were splitting up and everything was shit, the world was shit. She was off her meds, crying, not making a whole lot of sense. But that was nothing new. She always called me when she broke up with someone. I'm her mother."

"And when you got there?"

"She was sitting on the bed." Najma's eyes focused on something I couldn't see. "She put the inhaler to her mouth when I opened the door." Najma was looking into Room 103 of the Comfort Inn. "And I thought to myself, what does this poor girl want? Does she want me to witness her death or stop it? I tried to talk to her, you know. She seemed to listen. But when I asked her to put the inhaler down, she wouldn't. I moved toward her, slowly. Slowly. I told her that she didn't have to do anything. That we could just go home. And then I was this close." She reached a hand across the desk. "And I couldn't help myself. I tried to swat it out of her mouth. Either she pressed the button or I set it off." She sat down abruptly and put her head in her hands. "She didn't get the full dose. It took forever before it was over. She was in agony."

"I think she'd made up her mind, Ms. Jones." I was only trying to comfort her. "She wrote the note."

"I wrote the note." She glared at me. "I did."

There was nothing I could say. All the words in all the languages that had ever been spoken wouldn't come close to expressing this mother's grief. I thought the weight of it must surely crush her.

Through the open windows, I heard the snort of the first bus pulling into the turnaround in front of the school. Najma Jones glanced out at it, gathered herself and smiled. "Do you know what Rashmi means in Sanskrit?"

"No, ma'am."

"Ray of sunlight," she said. "The girls are here, Ms. Hardaway." She picked up the origami on her desk. "We have to be ready for them." She held it out to me. "Would you like a swan?"

By the time I came through the door of the school, the turnaround was filled with busses. Girls poured off them and swirled onto the playground: giggling girls, whispering girls, skipping girls, girls holding hands. And in the warm June sun, I could almost believe they were happy girls.

They paid no attention to me.

I tried Sharifa's call. "Hello?" Her voice was husky with sleep.

"Sorry I didn't make it home last night, sweetheart, " I said. "Just wanted to let you know that I'm on my way." O

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

THE SALT ROADS
by Nalo Hopkinson
Warner, $22.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-446-53302-5

Nalo Hopkinson's new book is a historical fantasy told through the eyes of three black women: a slave in colonial Haiti, the mistress of Charles Baudelaire, and a Nubian/Greek prostitute in the Alexandria of 345 CE. The three women are linked by Ezili, a *lwa* (essentially a goddess) of the voodoo pantheon, who travels across space and time to possess each of the three. Add a strong erotic element and a sly sense of humor, and the result is a historical fantasy considerably different from the usual fare.

The greatest external tension swirls around Auntie Mer, a Haitian slave. She witnesses both the relentless oppression of slave life and the planting of the seeds of the revolution that eventually freed the slaves of that country. A central theme is that the remnants of African culture, while brutally suppressed by the slave owners, are intensely present to the slaves themselves. They are kept alive in secret midnight meetings, where the spirits of the *lwa* take human bodies to serve as their steeds. The return to the plantation of Makandal, a fugitive slave who appears also to be a shape-changer, plays an eerie counterpoint to the carefully observed minutiae of daily life among the slaves.

Jeanne DuVal makes her home in Paris of the 1840s, where she is the half-acknowledged mistress of the poet Charles Baudelaire. She preserves some of the memory of these deep African roots, which her French contemporaries insist on seeing as primitive, earthy, and exotic; quotations from Baudelaire's poems emphasize the point. Hopkinson playfully introduces Jules Verne as a minor character; encouraged by Baudelaire to read Edgar Allen Poe, he returns several chapters later as the successful writer of his early SF adventures, for which he profusely thanks the still unsuccessful Baudelaire. For the most part, DuVal is a victim of exploitation and (as Baudelaire becomes more fashionable) of neglect.

Meanwhile, in the Fourth Century, the tavern prostitute Meritet falls for a Greek sailor and follows him aboard his boat. When he turns out to have another lover in the next port, Meritet and her companion Judah—a male prostitute from the same tavern—travel cross country to Jerusalem, center of the new Christian region. Once there, she freaks out the natives, delivers a baby, and then makes a trip into the desert, meeting a credulous hermit whose memory of the experience leads to her being canonized as Mary of Egypt. Unfazed by the experience, Meritet makes her way back to the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina, confident that she can always make a living on her back.

Tied together by Ezili's century-spanning quest for the meaning of love, the three stories eventually coalesce into an epitome of the cultural collision between Africa and

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Europe. Each of the three societies Hopkinson portrays is vivid with the details of everyday life, from the bustling brothel where Meritet works to the brutal conditions on Haiti's sugar cane plantations to the decadent shadow world of Baudelaire's Paris, precariously poised between bohemia and respectability.

Hopkinson deftly mixes outrage, eroticism, and broad comedy; this powerful historical should do even more to establish her as one of the most compelling new voices in the field. This novel has strong crossover potential, as well—I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see this one cited as an important new book by people who rarely notice genre writers.

PALADIN OF SOULS
by Lois McMaster Bujold
Eos (Harper Collins), $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-380-97902-0

Bujold's sequel to *The Curse of Chalion* follows the career of a widowed queen now released from the madness that caused her family to imprison her in the previous book.

As the story begins, Royina Ista dy Baocia has lost almost her entire family, and those who remain seem willing to keep her under wraps—no doubt from fear that her recovery from madness is only temporary. A strong, independent-minded woman, she insists on following her own course. As she quickly realizes, this will require her finding some way to escape from her solicitous guardians.

The answer she arrives at is a pilgrimage, under the guidance of Chivar dy Cabon, a cleric of the Bastard, one of the five gods recognized in Chalion. (The neighboring nations recognize only four, a source of constant strife between them.) With the addition of a young courtier named Liss whom she drafts as her personal maid and groom, and a small company of guards led by two brothers, Foix and Ferda dy Gura, she takes to the road. Adventures follow—beginning with one of the dy Guras falling under demonic possession, and culminating in most of the remainder of the party's being captured by a raiding party from Jokona, one of the nations that practices the heretical religion of four gods. Almost as suddenly as she was captured, Ista is rescued by a party from a nearby castle.

Ista is startled to learn the identity of their rescuer. Arhys dy Lutez, March of Castle Portifors, is the son of a courtier who died in the service of—and by the hand of—her royal husband. That alone creates a tension between them. But a deeper mystery lingers about dy Lutez, one that propels the entire direction of the novel once Ista arrives at his castle. She catches a glimpse of Arhys without his armor, and is startled to see that he appears to have a mortal wound, though he rides and fights like a man in the pink of health. Back at his castle, it becomes clear that there is some uncanny link between the March and his brother, who is confined to a secluded room in the castle and awakens only when Arhys is asleep. At the same time, there are whispered accusations concerning the March's young bride. And while Ista is sorting out these questions, a large force of Jokonan soldiers infests the castle, threatening to make her questions academic.

Bujold effectively juggles the external threat of the Jokonans, the mystery surrounding Arhys, the demonic possession of dy Gura, and

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Ista's own growing awareness of personal powers she has never before had reason to suspect, let alone put to use. Not surprisingly, all the plot problems turn out to have a single root, which in turn leads to Ista's discovery of her own real mission in life. As in the previous book in the series, Bujold gives a convincing portrait of a protagonist who is well past the age when heroic deeds are likely, but who manages nonetheless to find a way to prevail over the forces threatening herself and her nation. A strong performance by Bujold, who once again shows herself adept at slipping out of preconceived patterns and delivering a story with strong characters and a full quota of surprises.

CIGAR BOX FAUST and Other Miniatures
by Michael Swanwick
Tachyon, $14.95 (tp)
ISBN 1-892391-07-4

Here's a rarity—a collection of short-short stories by one of today's most versatile writers. The short-short demands of the writer a high level of imagination, a ruthless stripping away of everything that doesn't belong, and verbal precision more akin to poetry than to most other fictional forms. It also has something in common with the joke, and while humor isn't by any means essential to the short-short, it should surprise nobody who knows Swanwick's work that many of the stories here are extremely funny.

Swanwick has a reputation as a showman, and the title story is a good example of that aspect of his craft: a performance piece that retells the Faust legend (given a more extended treatment in his novel *Jack Faust*) using a cigar box, matches, and other small props. Irreverent to the core, it nonetheless touches all the high points of the Faust theme, in two and a half printed pages.

"Writing in My Sleep" is a short series of dream fragments, written down verbatim the next morning. Anyone who's ever tried this knows how easily something that seemed profound at the time can turn into utter nonsense when put on paper. Swanwick's dream transcriptions are more focused. They hover somewhere between miniature stories (though most of them are ultimately plotless), parables, and parodies. And when they do cross the border into nonsense, it is at least entertaining nonsense. That's no small accomplishment.

"Abecedary of the Imagination" is just what the title promises, a series of brief vignettes arranged alphabetically. The subjects range from "Culture Shock" to "Heaven," from "Oreo" to "Werewolf," and the overall tone tends toward the wry. "Archaic Planets" is a travelogue of the solar system, with a brief anecdote on each of the planets. Swanwick's son Sean contributed one of the sketches; without knowing ahead of time which one it was, I doubt anyone would be able to tell.

The other entries are equally evocative, despite the close confines the author has chosen to work in. Creating on a miniature scale, the writer's voice has to carry much of the load, since there is so little room to develop plot or character. This becomes especially evident in the next-to-last piece in the book, a series of "Letters to the Editor" of *Asimov's,* replying to the request for updated biographies to accompany stories he has published here over the years. Each takes a more

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bizarre tack than the previous, turning a series of routine answers to a stock question into an imaginative tour de force.

Strongly recommended; a fine example of why every thinking fan should support small press publishers. (Tachyon books can be reached online at *www.Tachyon-Publications.com*)

COALESCENT
by Steven Baxter
Del Rey, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-45785-4

Baxter's latest is best described as a secret history spanning two millennia, culminating in a startling revelation of the true forces behind the headlines and history we see.

Baxter concentrates on three stories. Two of them are set in the present, in which a middle-aged man investigates a mystery uncovered in his dead father's papers, and the third takes place in the past, beginning with a young woman living in Britain just as the last vestiges of Roman rule are dwindling away into savagery. Most readers will guess at an early stage that the past and present stories are related; just how is the mystery that Baxter uses to give the plot momentum.

The modern story begins when George Poole's father dies unexpectedly. Going through his effects, George uncovers a surprise and a mystery. The surprise is a photo showing George as a toddler with a young girl, to all appearances his twin—a twin of whom he has no memory. The mystery is a series of payments his father has been making to what appears to be a Catholic charity, though one that George has never heard of: the Order of Holy Mary, Queen of Virgins. Searching for answers, he visits first his estranged older sister in Florida, who at first is reluctant to discuss the subject. Finally, she admits that there was a twin sister who was sent away, and refers him to the Catholic girls' school his twin attended. Stonewalled by the headmistress, he then goes to Rome, convinced there is some connection between the Order and his vanished sister.

Alternating with George's pilgrimage is the story of Regina, daughter of a Roman merchant in sixth-century Britain. When her father dies and her mother leaves to join her family in Rome, Regina follows her grandfather, a soldier on the Wall. When even that last bastion against the barbarians proves inadequate, she flees with her former servant into the hinterlands, searching for someplace stable to carry on her life. Slowly, Regina comes to understand that she is no longer the mistress, and that only hard work will bring her through. Still, she nurses the dream of Rome, and the illusion that once the Emperor reasserts himself, things will return to normal.

Part two of the book takes the reader to a mysterious subterranean space where the Order is carrying on its work, much of which is concerned with perpetuating its own existence. We meet Lucia, one of hundreds of young women living and working in a hive-like society just below the pavements of Rome. To her great dismay, Lucia is experiencing menarche, a rarity among the young women who make up the rank and file of the Order. Eventually she takes her secret to one of her superiors, who promotes Lucia as a replacement for one of the Order's mothers, who has reached the

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end of her unusually prolonged life span. As the story progresses, the reader begins to recognize that the Order is not so much a religious entity as a mechanism for creating a new human species analogous to social insects.

Parallel to Lucia's story, Baxter continues the story of Regina's exile in her own country, now being invaded by the Angles and Saxons who will eventually give England its name and its language. Taking refuge in the western hills, she links up with a charismatic warrior who is leading the resistance, a man whom the reader quickly recognizes as the historical model for Arthur. But it soon becomes apparent that Regina has her own agenda, which leads her eventually to Rome—and to a reunion with various characters from her early life, before she achieves her goal with the founding of the order.

Baxter smoothly alternates his "secret history" with a contemporary thriller, deftly dropping in additional science fictional wrinkles and sly observations of daily life in three countries. According to the publisher's blurb, this is the first of three related novels, in a series to be called "Destiny's Children," tracing alternate paths for the future evolution of our species. If the first is a fair sample, the other two will be well worth waiting for.

LONELY PLANETS: The Natural Philosophy of Alien Life
by David Grinspoon
Ecco (Harper Collins), $25.95
ISBN 0-06-018540-6

David Grinspoon is an astrophysicist and planetary scientist at the University of Colorado, whose previous book for a popular audience was a well-written summary of the latest scientific findings about the planet Venus. But Grinspoon's credentials for popular science stretch well back into his earliest years, when the likes of Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov were regular visitors to his parents' home (his father was a widely known Harvard professor). What more likely subject for him to turn to than the question of life on other worlds?

Astrobiology is still an infant science, and one aware of its need for something concrete to study. All the formidable intellect and technological ingenuity spent searching for evidence of life beyond our planet has so far turned up nothing better than a few tantalizing maybes. That depressing track record has led many scientists to conclude that we are alone in the universe: maybe we'll find a few Martian lichens, but we can pretty much forget about Kzinti or sandworms. Grinspoon has read the nay-sayers, but he doesn't buy their pessimism. In fact, he digs into his subject with unmistakable relish.

After a lively summary of the history of scientific interest in life beyond Earth, beginning with the discovery roughly five hundred years ago that the planets are worlds like ours, Grinspoon turns his attention to current scientific opinion on ET life. At present, our knowledge about life is confined to specimens from a single world, all built around a few common molecules. Discovery of even one living creature on another world would dramatically alter our perspective. Grinspoon looks at the likely candidates among our nearer neighbors, and places his bets. The subsurface oceans of Europa may have the

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best chance of harboring life; but not even the hellish conditions of Venus can be entirely ruled out—could there be life in those acidic clouds?

Every discussion of extraterrestrial life eventually has to provide an answer to Fermi's Paradox: if intelligent life is (as theory suggests) common in the universe, why hasn't it already been detected? Grinspoon discusses the possible answers, ranging from the worst case scenario (we are alone in the universe) to the UFO conspiratists' conviction that ETs are here, making contact with selected humans. The answer, he points out, depends closely on a significant term in the Drake equation—the life span of technological societies. Again, having only one specimen to judge by leaves us at a disadvantage.

The third section of the book is probably where Grinspoon had the most fun; in it, he explores the far fringes of the subject, from UFO abductions to crop circles and mutilations of farm animals. Grinspoon carefully resists the temptation to sneer at some of the apparently irrational notions that he looks at in this section. As he points out, organized skepticism often has a problem recognizing truths that don't conform to the scientific model. (For example, an alien society sufficiently advanced to travel interstellar distances might well be able to avoid leaving behind physical clues for Earth's scientists to examine.) He concludes with the suggestion that our civilization could be a mere stepping stone to some higher form of consciousness, and that all truly advanced life forms are immortal.

Astrobiology is in the final analysis, according to Grinspoon, a new manifestation of natural philosophy, which is what all science called itself a couple of centuries ago. That designation is attractive, combining as it does the careful study of nature and the broad-minded perspectives of philosophy. Those qualities are evident in this book, along with a healthy sense of humor and a wide range of literary and cultural allusion (his references range from Sturgeon and Gamow to *South Park* and David Bowie). Great fun—and must reading for anyone interested in the possibility that there just might be real aliens out there, after all. ○

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

April is the last chance to join the 2005 Seattle NASFiC before rates go up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 2004

15–18—**Nebula Awards Weekend.** For info, write: **c/o Joni Dashoff, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) sfwa.org. (E-mail) astrbear@ix.netcom.com.** Con will be held in: Seattle WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Westin Hotel. Guests will include: none announced.

16–18—**EerieCon. eeriecon.org.** Days Inn at the Falls, Niagara Falls NY. Larry Niven, Anne Bishop, Brian Lumley.

16–18—**PenguiCon. penguicon.org.** Sheraton, Novi (Detroit) MI. Gaiman, Jackson, Wheaton. SF, fantasy—and Linux.

16–18—**StarFest. (303) 757-5850. starland.com. starland@starland.com.** Marriott Tech Cntr., Denver CO. Star Trek.

23–25—**VulKon. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** Cleveland OH. Mercedes McNab. Commercial media-oriented con.

23–25—**SakuraCon. (253) 503-2233. sakuracon.org.** SeaTac Hilton, Seattle WA. Anime.

23–25—**BakuretsuCon. bakuretsucon.org.** Burlington VT. Anime.

23–26—**Australia Nat'l. Con. (0418) 160-540. conflux.org.au.** Canberra. Greg Benford, Sean McMullen, H. Turtledove.

30–June 2—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50323. demicon.org.** Hotel Ft. Des Moines. Bull, Shetterly, Freas.

30–June 2—**Malice Domestic, 703 Kenbrook Dr., Silver Spring MD 20902. (703) 751-4444.** DC area. Mysteries.

30–June 2—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** Tampa FL. Commercial.

MAY 2004

1—**GenreCon, c/o Lambton Library, 124 S. Christina, Samia ON N7T 2M6. (519) 337-3291. genreconca@yahoo.ca.**

7–9—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Phoenix AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org.** Sheraton Crescent. Giancola. Art con.

14–16—**Anime Central, 1400 W. Devon Av. #410, Chicago IL 60660. acen.org.** O'Hare Hyatt, Rosemont IL.

21–23—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E7. (204) 669-6053. keycon.org.** Radisson. D. Duncan, James Ernest.

21–23—**FedCon, Schisslerstr. 4, Augsburg D-86154, Germany. (0821) 219-0932. fedcon.de.** Maritim, Bonn. Trek.

28–30—**MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. marcon.org.** Hyatt. N. Thomas, Zetterberg, Eggleton, the Trimbles.

28–30—**Oasis, Box 592905, Orlando FL 32859. (407) 263-5822. oasfis.org.** Radisson. A. Steele, H. Ed Cox, Longcor.

28–30—**ConDuit, Box 11745, Salt Lake UT 84147. (810) 467-8994. conduit.sfcon.org.** Wyndham. S. Lee & S. Miller.

28–30—**ConVival, Lowhill House West, Glasgow G76 ONU, UK. empirewideweb.com.** Quality Central. Victorian SF.

28–31—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 536-2737. balticon.org.** Wyndham. Bujold, Seeley, Alexander.

28–31—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. sf3.org.** Concourse. Eleanor Arnason, Patricia A. McKillip. Feminist SF.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $180+.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $135+/£85+.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $75.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125+.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Trinoc*con
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Steve Miller & Sharon Lee, Sam Lewis, Dave Arneson, Erin Lindsay, and others:
http://www.trinoc-con.org

AUDIO/VIDEO

Audiobooks, Niven, LeGuin, Willis, Baxter, Egan, Sterling, Reed, Etc. www.audiotexttapes.com

Nova Audio. Scifi Short stories by Robert Silverberg, Sarah Hoyt, Cecilia Tan, & more. http://www.nova-audio.com/

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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE FICTION print magazine and webzine. http://www.gateway-sf-magazine.com

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK ONLINE, Third Millennium Publishing, a cooperative of online writers and resources, http://3mpub.com

Sci Fi author Paul Collins has a new book out called Prescience Rendezvous, which is available at http://www.publishamerica.com. If you wish to order a copy, or arrange a book signing, please call 240-529-1031.

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY ISSUE

Critically acclaimed author **Judith Berman** plunges us into a frightening near-future world in our lead story for July, one where the survivors of a worldwide apocalypse must contend with incursions by rapacious alien invaders, as well as with infiltration by threats more subtle and harder to defend against, as they brace themselves to survive the impact of "The Fear Gun"—IF they can! This is a scary and vivid old-fashioned adventure of the most entertaining kind, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN JULY

Hugo-winner **Allen M. Steele** takes us back to the war-torn frontier planet of Coyote for a suspenseful look at the fateful events that take place at "Shady Grove"; **Kathleen Ann Goonan** returns after too long an absence to sing us some intriguing and surprising "Dinosaur Songs"; Hugo and World Fantasy Award-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** warns us that sometimes it's all-too-easy not to see the "Forest for the Trees"; **Robert Reed**, one of our most popular and prolific authors, gives us some unsettling "Daily Reports" on a very grim situation indeed; and madcap king **Eliot Fintushel** hastens to assure us that "Gwendolyn Is Happy to Serve You."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column contributes more insights "Toward a Theory of Story III: The Storyteller as Shaman"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On The Net" column takes a look at—grab on to your seats!—"FTL"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our July issue on sale at your newsstand on May 18, 2004.

COMING SOON

gripping new stories by **William Barton, Tanith Lee, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, William Sanders, Charles Stross, Robert Reed, Mary Rosenblum, Paul Melko, David D. Levine, David Moles, Jack Skillingstead, Paolo Bacigalupi**, and many others,

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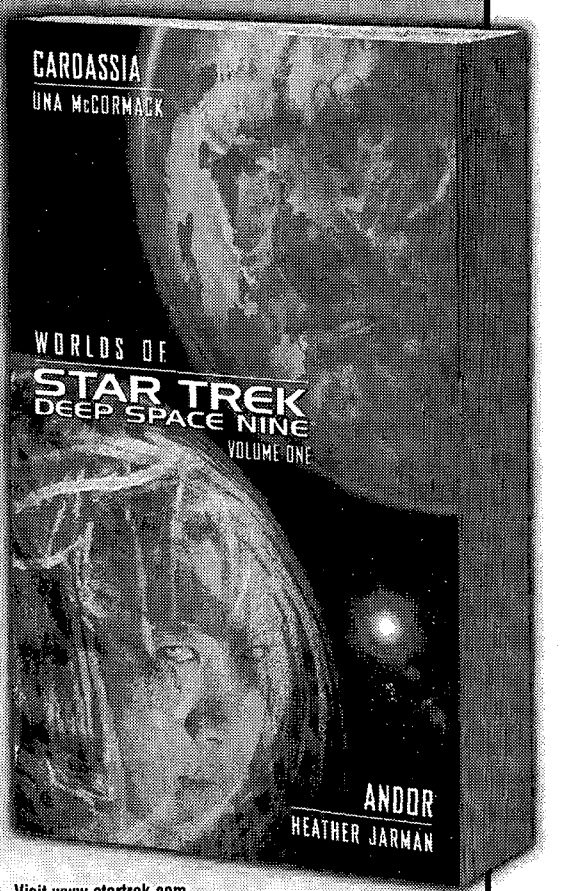

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Enjoy sunshine every day of the year-indoors!

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CLEARER, BRIGHTER, EASY ON THE EYES NATURAL LIGHT FOR READING, WORK, AND HOBBIES

- COLORS LOOK MORE VIVID AND TRUE TO LIFE
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Everything seems easier to see

This is the clearest, whitest, and brightest lamp we have found. Colors look more vivid and true to life. Black and white contrast is improved, and details can be easier to distinguish.

Helps reduce glare-related eyestrain

Soft and pure white light spreads evenly across your personal space. So you see more comfortably for reading, working, and all close up tasks and hobbies. There is virtually no glare, making this the perfect companion light for computer work.

Save $$$ on your electric bills!

The supplied high-tech 27-watt bulb gives as much light as an ordinary 150-watt bulb, but uses far less energy. The bulb can last up to 5000 hours - 5 times longer than other bulbs—for years of normal use.

We've nicknamed our Sunlight Lamp the "It's great to be alive lamp!"

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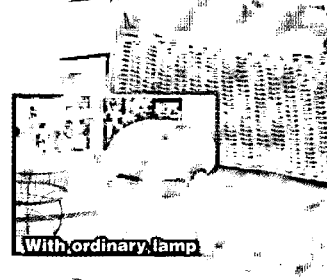

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